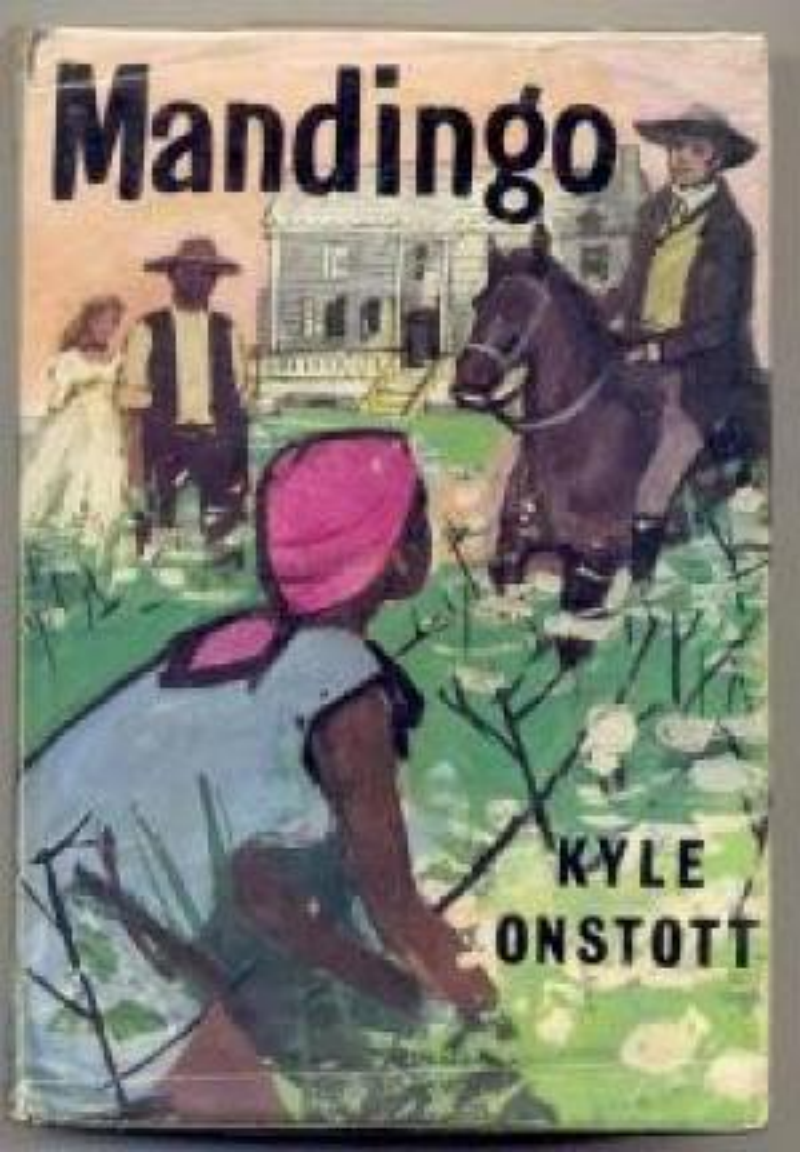
Mandingo
KYLE
ONSTOTT

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By

KYLE ONSTOTT

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

The author of many semi-technical and technical works, Klye Onstott has woven the factual details of the slave-bound economy of the South into a historical novel that will establish his unqualified position as a master story-teller who ranks among the literary great of our times.

Ten years of intensive research that only a perfectionist would have undertaken are reflectd in *The Mandingo,* Mr. Onstott's first novel. The plot itself is sufficient to make this an outstandingly different book. But aside from the day-by-day happenings that influence the destiny of the fictional characters here protrayed, Mr. Onstott unveils the portending events that led to the struggle between South and North, between slavery and freedom, between an economy based on trading in human flesh and one based on the inherent right of free enterprise among all who call America home.

From today's vantage point, almost a hundred years after the cataclysm, the developing situation may be viewed objeceively. Actually, the finger of blame should be pointed at no one geographical group of people. Although the factions that promoted the abolition of slavery were ethically in the right, Southern planters in general are shown to have been victims of circumstances rather than diabolical tyrants as they have sometimes been painted.

The land, once the most valuable asset of the plantation owner, deteriorated through lack of knowledge of conservation methods. In turn, the potential return from the sale of agricultural products gradually lessened. In an attempt to drain the final dregs from the impoverished soil, slave labor was utilized. But finally, the land became so nearly exhausted that the planters turned to the more lucrative enterprise of propagating slaves for marketing to land owners in other areas. Then as a sordid outgrowth of a final endeavor to maintain financial security, speculation in the slave market became the transcendent interest. More emphasis was placed on the propagation of slave stock than on the production of any other commodity. The excuse was used that the practice was intended to better the physical characteristics of the offspring. But physical oddities and freaks were as much in demand as were the robust.

The average plantation owner was considerate of the welfare of his human property. But he was considerate not as one concerned with the needs

of another—rather, the planter's concern was based on maintaining and increasing the value of a marketable chattle.

While the social outlook of today is on a vastly different plane, it must be remembered that the average person of our time is no different from his counterpart of a century ago. Lacking the means of rapid transportation and communication, people of that time were confined both geographically and intellectually to smaller spheres. Nevertheless, their scope of thought, their methods of coping with individual situations, and their approach to the problems of the day were different only because circumstances were different.

CHAPTER 1

THE old man heard the closing of the front door and the limping step in the hall. He was pleased that his son should evince the good sense to send the Negroes to the quarters in mid-morning and to come into the house and out of the cold, drizzling February rain. Besides his anxiety about the boy's exposure to the elements, he relished his son's companionship whenever the boy could be induced to relinquish his indefatigable driving and to drink with him before the fire. When the door to the sitting room opened and Hammond stood on a broad base just inside it, however, Maxwell knew that work had not been adjourned.

"Big Tom ain't a-goin' to bust his britches, I reckon, like he done three year ago, but it comin' up powerful fast. Water clean over the pint a'ready," the young man announced in a tone of anxiety. "And this rainin' don't clear, no tellin'."

"Set down; set down," the father calmed. "The ol' Tombigbee bin rampagin' now an' agin for fifty year that I recollect and a-goin' to I reckon for fifty more. Ain't never got up to the house yet. Cain't, on a hill like we are. Not even to the cabins, though it did swamp the meetin' house oncet—right after it was built. Set down and have Mem stir you a toddy. A col' day like this, do you good."

"Guess not. I ain't got time," said the boy.

"All the time they is," argued the father. "Cain't keep the Tombigbee from floodin' oncet it's a-mind. Wait and it'll go down."

"An' tote away all the good black dirt on Falconhurst," added Hammond.

"S'posin' it do—what there is left of it? S'posin' it do, Son? Ain't much. Falconhurst dirt is most niggered out anyhow. Leastwise you cain't sweep back ol' Tom with no broom, you and all the niggers on the place, all a-sweepin'."

Hammond shrugged. "Reckon not," he said. "I cain't do nothin', seems like. Only I kin watch it come up. Besides, I got them boys a-cuttin'. Gotten to git back."

"This weather—no time fer choppin' trees," declared the old man. "Lible to git the lung fever in this col' rain. One of them young bucks git lung fever an' die on you, worth more than all the rails and wood you kin cut in ten years—jest one of 'em, sayin' nothin' about you your own self."

"I'm warm, Papa, this coat an' all. Don't fret you none about me. And choppin' keep the niggers het up. They ain't goin' melt."

"They yourn much as they mine, Son. Kill 'em off, you cravin' to. An' you die, I'll bury you, though I swan if I know whut t'hell I'd do."

Hammond walked across the room to kiss his father before he returned to his labors, a ceremony which the son had inadvertently omitted on his arrival. As he leaned over the old man, he picked up the glass of toddy and took a swallow.

"Take more, take more," urged Maxwell. "Do you good, Son. Gittin' too cooled off fer me anyways. Got to have me another'n, and I kin ever git that triflin' Memnon to stir me one."

"Jest a mouthful, all I'm a-wantin'," Hammond said and then asked, "That Mem, ain't he takin' care of you? I'll cuss spryness into him as I go along back to work."

"Nev' mind, never mind! I kin do all the cussin' he needin'. But it look like he need touchin' up around the edges. I cain't do that in the shape I'm gittin'. You goin' to have to tend to him. A dose of snake is the only thing that will cure his slothiness."

"Any time you say I'll tear the skin offn his black ass. How you come on? Seem like you always worse this kind of weather." As he spoke, Hammond lifted his father's hand in his own and scanned the swollen knuckles.

"Bad, bad today. Worse than ever, seem like. Knees, elbows, back, and han's, all over me."

"Be better when it turns warm. Jest bake yourself before the fire, bake yourself," advised his son.

"I do, I do bake," agreed the father. "Best thing fer rheumatiz is whiskey. Drink lots of toddy. Only thing that give any help."

"I'll send you a fresh toddy as I go," said the boy. "Drink plenty."

"My rheumatiz ain't spoiled my voice. I kin call that boy when I needin' a toddy," the father said and proceeded to demonstrate. "Mem!" he called stentoriously. "Mem! Memnon!" he called again even louder than before.

Hammond started toward the dining room to get Memnon when the boy opened the door with apparent alacrity, more assumed than real.

"Didn't you hear me callin', Mem, you god damn black varmint? Stir me a toddy, hot, mind you. Now! Not nex' week," his owner commanded.

"Yas, suh, Masta," said the slave and started to go.

"I talk to you, I cod you, I beg you, an' I cuss you," the master said sternly. "Only I cain't whup you—with this rheumatiz. You young masta got to do that."

The slave was used to the threats of his old master which, so far, had always come to nothing. None the less, Agamemnon did not relish even so much as the possibility of the execution of one of those threats and rolled his eyes toward the younger Maxwell, with dilated pupil and a show of white.

"Whenever you reckon, I'll take keer of him," Hammond promised his father. "Whut you think, boy? When I whups, I whups—takes the meat right off your bones. Eh?"

"Naw, suh, please, suh, Masta, suh," replied the Negro. "I be spry. I ain't goin' to sloth no mo'." While he reckoned the impatience of his senior master to be mere bluster, he was by no means sure that the forthright younger man did not mean what he said, especially if the comfort of his invalid father was involved. Memnon knew, not that he was lazy, but that he was lax, sloth-

ful, and procrastinating, and he resolved henceforth to be more diligent—at least for a time, until the edge should wear off the old man's ire. His duties were small enough, to mix toddies for the elder man, to replenish the fire, to serve at table, to remove his masters' clothes at night and to help to put them on in the morning; and he was indulged, fed white man's viands, kept in clean, whole clothes, given at least one ardent woman with whom to sleep, with a frequent alternate. And he was valuable, strong thewed, broad shouldered, yellow skinned, free from scars, disfigurements, or blemishes. He knew he was not for sale, though he was past thirty and would bring a larger price now than later, but it was unthinkable that his young master would risk scarring him up with the whip and reducing his market worth, especially since he knew the pride the Maxwells took in having their stock, human and quadruped, clean-limbed and sound.

Despite the cold rain and the father's entreaties, the son returned to his work, determined to clear more land, split the rails to fence it, chop wood for the house fires, but above all to keep the Negroes employed and exercised. Agamemnon prepared the toddy that Maxwell had ordered, saw to it that it was hot, as commanded, and when he brought it into the sitting room, saw that the fire was burning low in the fireplace. Without waiting for the old man's maledictory prompting, he brought fresh chunks of water-oak and adjusted them upon the dog-irons.

Maxwell, surprised at the slave's access of industry and disappointed of a pretext to revile him, could only grunt at what he assumed was a sign of reformation. His joints racked, and he lifted one hand with the other and examined the swollen knuckles. Yet, in spite of the pain and effort it cost him, he braced himself and staggered to his feet occasionally to totter to the wavy window to scan the weather, just to prove to himself that he was able to do it and to alter the tedium of watching the fire and waiting for Hammond's return. His concerns for the weather, such as they were, were for the effects of the persistent rain and the blustering cold upon the pains in his joints, which he believed, perhaps rightly, were aggravated by the inclemency, and, more than his own rheumatism, lest Hammond should be made ill by exposure to the elements. He wasted no thought upon the flood of the rising river and its inundation of the lower reaches of the plantation, which was to be expected every few years and which could do no further harm than to carry away a layer of the already exhausted top soil in which he had little interest. He was reassured by Hammond's confidence that work would keep his woodchoppers warm and gave their health no further thought.

On one of the excursions, close on to noon, he noted that the downpour had subsided to a mere drizzle and scanned the sky for a patch of blue in the hope that the rain would cease altogether. Between the boles of the bare miscellany of trees, maples, tupelos, oaks, chestnuts, hickories, and elms, that behind a zigzag stake-and-rider fence lined the long avenue that led to the main road, he descried a moving object. He could not credit that a visitor

was arriving at Falconhurst on so wretched a day and through such mire as the rains had made of the roads.

He could not be sure. "Mem!" he bellowed. "Memnon! Memnon, you hear? Memnon, you yaller mongrel! Come here! Come here, I'm sayin'!"

Drowsing before the fireplace in the kitchen, Mem roused himself and shuffled unhurriedly across the open passageway, through the dining room, and into the living room. "Yas, suh, Masta. You a-callin'?"

"Course I'm a-callin'. Come here to this winder. Look out. Whut you reckon that be movin' up that laneway?"

Mem looked. "Look like horse with gen'man a-ridin'," he said.

The object of their vision was by the time of Mem's arrival no longer in doubt and Maxwell assumed that it had never been. "Course it a gen'leman and of course he ridin' a horse," he said contemptuously. "But who it goin' to be? Who comin' to Falconhurst in all this weather and through all this mire?"

Memnon had no concept and disclaimed any. His interest was no less, however, than his owner's. "Now we'll have doin's," he declared optimistically. The arrival of any white man at Falconhurst was an occasion, and only a white man would be riding a horse.

The horseman emerged into the open and it could be seen that the man wore a frock coat and a slouch hat, as might have been expected, that he was thin to emaciation without being very tall, that his bay mount was tired, muddy, and from his action probably a gelding, for which Maxwell felt a contempt.

Three children ran beside the horse, lifting their feet high in an effort to surmount the mud. The man monotonously cracked a whip to urge the children's haste, but he usually and intentionally just missed them. Now and again one was seen to flinch when a blow stung its legs or buttocks, and for three or four strides to hasten its pace.

"Jest a nigger buyer," scoffed Maxwell more to himself than to his servant.

Despite the contempt in his voice, he hastened to the double front doors and went out on the veranda, followed closely by Agamemnon, to await his guest. The profession of dealing in Negroes was deprecated, but the scorn for it was not so intense as to warrant a denial of hospitality to its practitioners. The disdain was for the calling, not for the man. If it was an evil, it was a convenient evil. Dealers saved planters from the necessity of a trip to market with one or two slaves; they were not too particular about the viciousness of Negroes they bought for early resale and were good agencies for the riddance of "bad" Negroes; and better yet, they paid cash on the barrelhead for their purchases. Moreover, they were white.

Visitors to Falconhurst were rare; they brought news. And Maxwell's dislike for dealers was more of a convention than a conviction. He was aware that his own rung of the social hierarchy was not that of a gentleman—not a fine gentleman at least, merely a gentleman by courtesy, far, far above

a dealer but not quite a full gentleman.

The stranger dismounted stiffly from his horse, briefly rubbed his lean flanks to relieve the fatigue of the saddle, doffed his hat, and said, "Howdy, snh. Name of Brownlee—Brownlee."

The Negro children who accompanied him retreated to the off side of the horse, and open mouthed, looked warily around it at their master's reception.

"Name of Maxwell, suh, Warren Maxwell," the host returned the greeting and identified himself.

"I was informed of your name, suh. It's well and, pardon me, suh, favorably known in these parts."

"Ought to be, suh. We been right here at Falconhurst sence befo' the rebellion of 1776." The reply was not ungenial, but it served to underline the difference between gentleman planter and slave dealer. No gesture of handshaking was made by either man. "Cast the bridle to the boy, suh, who will stable your horse and bed down your servants. Then, come right in. Dinner is in the course of preparation, mighty nigh ready."

Agamemnon caught the reins, but only to turn the chore over to another black boy who had appeared, more bold than the other Negroes, from behind one corner of the house. Brownlee had an eye for a Negro and quickly noted that this slave boy had only two toes—the great and the little one—on his left foot. Every eye in the quarters appraised the visitor from cover. His arrival was an event and was reason for speculation and low-toned talk.

Maxwell was specific in his orders to the black. "Take the gen'leman's horse straight to the stable. Take off his gear and wash him down good—warm water, mind you, not too hot, but warm. I ketches you washing a horse with col' water this time of year, I'll hide you sure."

"Yas, suh, Masta," the boy replied conventionally.

"And take these little niggers with you and bed 'em down in another stall and give them some pone, all they'll eat of it. Cook will issue you some black-strap to make it tasty. Tell her I said to."

"Cook won't give black-strap to no nigger withouten your say," protested the boy.

"Tell her I say. If she don't heed you, have her ask Memnon."

"Yas, suh, Masta; have cook ast Memnon," the boy repeated to impress the command on his own mind.

Maxwell consulted Brownlee, "Reckon I better have your niggers chained up?"

"I reckon it ain't necessary on a cold day like this. They too tired to run. Of course you cain't tell whut goes on in a nigger's haid," he reconsidered. "Wouldn't do no harm."

Maxwell turned again to the boy. "And chain the niggers to the side of their stall—the wench separate from the bucks. Use them small little anklets that they cain't slip out of and fetch the keys up and turn 'em over to Memnon."

"Turn keys over to Memnon," the black repeated *sotto voce.*

"When that mud on their legs dries out, crack it and rub it off, too," interposed Brownlee. "Pardon me, suh, fer giving orders to yo' servant," he apologized to Maxwell.

"My servants are yo' servants, suh, so long as you honors me with your company at Falconhurst, yours to command and use as you chooses," Maxwell reassured his guest. "Anything else the boy kin do fer yo' property, suh?"

"That will accommodate me nicely, suh, nicely."

"Memnon, go down after dinner to the stable and see that this boy—whut's your name, boy?" the master broke off.

"My name Preacha', suh, please," the confused boy stuttered.

"Whut's that? Talk plain."

"Preacha', suh. My name Preacha'."

"Preacha'? I don't like it. It don't mean nothin'. I like names out'n history or names of heathen gods."

"My mammy wanted that I should be a preacha'—a reverend."

"I'll reverend you. We'll change your name right now—let's see—Barbarosa. We haven't had a Barbarosa fer a long time. Remember that—your name is Barbarosa."

"Barbarosa, Barbarosa, Barbarosa," the baffled boy muttered in determination to remember his new designation.

Maxwell continued his orders to Memnon, "See that this Barber do all whut I told him. If he neglect that horse and if he don't take good care of them niggers, he kin depen' on a hidin'. Understand, boy?"

"Yas, suh, Masta."

"That's all," said the master.

The newly christened Barbarosa led the horse toward the stable, followed by the three children. "Barber, Barber, Barber—something or t'other. My masta done change me from Preacha' to Barba'," and he snapped his fingers, "jest like that," he said to himself but aloud. Then he laughed delightedly at his own joke. "Barba', Barba', Bar—."

"I trade in niggers," Brownlee announced to Maxwell.

"So I reckoned, suh, so I reckoned," replied the host. "We got to have traders if we're goin' to have niggers. We cain't eat 'em."

"I know some gen'lemen don't like traders, but everybody's got to live. Whut would you planters do withouten we traders?"

"We'd have to plow the niggers under, I reckon. I got nothing agin' traders. I've sold to lots of 'em; they're welcome rigbt in my house and at my table—that is, sence my wife passed away. She was a Hammond, daughter of old Mista Theophilus Hammond of the Anglebranch Plantation down near Selma. Mista Theophilus wouldn't have no truck with traders—a fine gen'leman. He never sold a servant—not one. Bred good niggers too. I remember twenty year back when servants was cheap, Theophilus Hammond pay two

thousand dollars fer a yaller quadroon stallion—a lot of money them days."

"Sure was. Why even today you can pick up a mighty noble hand, housebroke and everything, fer fifteen hundred or two thousand. Jest before Christmas I sold a big, sound, robust buck, six foot one and shoulders like that," and he stretched his arms, "right off the block in New Orleans fer fourteen hundred—yeller, too, good enough to cover anybody's wenches."

Mr. Maxwell refused to relinquish his aristocratic father-in-law. "Of course, Mista Theophilus (being in the family I calls him by his first name), used to sell off a bad nigger, if he got one; or he'd sell to accommodate a friend with a good house-boy or a fancy, yaller sew-er; or he'd rarely, rarely, part with a young buck to get money to run Anglebranch Plantation and feed the other hands till cotton time. But he never made a practice of selling his stock at all. Didn't trust traders and wouldn't sell to 'em."

"I come a right smart out of my way to pay my respects to yo'," (Brownlee bowed and Maxwell returned the bow in so far as his rheumatism permitted), "and see didn't yo' all have a few servants you wanted to git shet of."

"No, cain't say we have. I sent a fine coffle of prime young bucks Natchez way, right after pickin' time. If yo' had of come along about then we could have talked, but I ain't got nothin' prime to offer yo' right now."

"They don't got to be prime, suh. I'll prime 'em when I git 'em to New Orleans," Brownlee urged, betraying his eagerness.

"If yo' come this way again in the late fall, I might have a dozen or fifteen nice, strapping boys fer yo', or a wench or two if I kin git 'em knocked up and showing. Don't pay to sell a wench open. Buyers like to git two fer the price of one."

"Don't know if'n I could afford to relieve you of a dozen at a time. Limited capital, yo' know, mighty limited, but I'll be here—count on't."

The wind was playing through Maxwell's shock of red hair, and he suddenly was aware of the chill in the air that would worsen his rheumatism.

"Right like to rain some more; I kin feel it right in my jints. Wind a-comin' up, too. One good comes out of this consarned rheumatiz—learns me to prognosticate." He rubbed the swollen joints of one hand over the equally swollen knuckles of the other. "I'll always remember 1831 as a wet year, the year the rheumatiz got me. And now in February, it's started out wet again and the rheumatiz mirrors the weather, seems like."

"Roads like thick gumbo, all the way across Alabama, ever sence I left the Georgia line. Horse mired up to his fetlocks and the young niggers muddy half up to the crotch. Had to stop oncet and take the little wench up on the crupper; and lashing the two boys slowed 'em down more than it hurried 'em up. Nigh glad I had so scant a coffle because they a-goin' to be all skinny, even if not sick, before I kin fetch 'em to market." Mr. Brownlee sighed, removed his square lensed spectacles, wiped his bloodshot, porcine blue eyes on a soiled blue bandana which he drew from the tail of his frock coat after which he took off his black slouch hat and wiped with the bandana his bald

scalp with the tufts of curly black hair above the ears. His small face had been smooth some three or four days ago, but now it was scantily peppered with black.

"Now, howsomever, at last yo' kin rest your bones and fatten your niggers. Falconhurst Plantation ain't no palace, but its roof don't leak none; the vittles ain't like you're prob'ly used to at the Verandah House in New Orleans, but they're fattenin'; and the corn ain't aged in the wood, but the water in the toddy is shore hot. You're right welcome, suh. We hope you'll squander some time with us, leastwise till after the spell of weather."

"No, thankee, I reckon I better git along this same evenin', more 'specially that yo' cain't spare me no niggers. The nigger crop is real slim ever'whure. Cain't buy nowhures, Virginia, the Carolinas, Georgia, and now Alabama. And the prices are going up like balloons in the wind. I laid down enough fer them three runty culls to buy prime hands five year back," complained Brownlee.

"No hurry at all," argued Maxwell. "Not many gen'lemen honor us at Falconhurst."

"Got to git along. Got to git along. I values your hospitality, suh, but I got to git along."

"Come morning and I might, I jest might, fix my mind on letting yo' carry away a buck or two. We are all run over with young niggers, got to kick 'em out of the way to walk, but they jest too young to dispose of to advantage me. Take a fifteen or sixteen year buck, with plenty of pone, liable to grow almost a hand a year, sometimes a hand and one; makes a difference of two or three hundred dollars in this market. I kin found and frock a growing buck—good, too—fer seventeen dollar a year; some gen'lemen figures fifteen, but it's too scrimping if you want to grow 'em fast and keep 'em prime."

"I need niggers, I do indeed, suh," emphasized Brownlee. "If there is a chance to dicker and yo' prices are not too powerful, I'll settle down and discommode you all fer the night."

"Nothin' at all, nothin' at all. Yo' cain't discommode me one bit. Charmed to enjoy your conversation. Of course yo' remember I say I might sell, not that I would sell. I'll have to counsel with my son. Turn the whole plantation-shebang over to him to run, account of my rheumatiz. Cain't set a horse at all. Let him run it his own way.

"But come into the house, suh, come right in and set," urged Maxwell, spitting into his hand and hurling to the ground a cud of tobacco he had been harboring in his jaw. "You're right welcome, suh," he reiterated truthfully. "Dinner will be ready soon as Ham rides up."

Brownlee paused on the gallery which fronted the house to remove on the foot scraper some of the mud that was drying on his boots.

"Never mind that, never mind," said Maxwell as he held open the door. "We ain't got no finery, jest rag carpets all over and plenty of nigger grease

to clean things up. A little mud don't matter at all."

"Seem to me a purty fine mansion," Brownlee looked about him. "Mighty comfortable."

"My grandpappy built a log house in the clearing right here. My pappy built this nine room clapboard, which was good enough, a plain and common house in his day, purty fancy, fact is, then, fer these parts. I was jest aiming to build a better'n—could well afford it too—somethin' like Mista Tom Jefferson's place back in Virginia—fitten to live in like a gen'leman—when my wife upped and passed away seven years back. My wife was a Hammond, daughter of ol' Mista Theophilus Hammon' of Anglebranch Plantation."

"Fine family; fine, fine family," interposed Brownlee.

"I aimed to build a mansion, as I'm a-telling you, when she come down, some female trouble, a growth. And when she went to her reward, it jest nearly tore the bowels right out'n me. I ain't got over it yet. I jist dropped everything. This old house good enough fer the boy and me."

"Good enough fer anybody, seem like," declared the guest.

"Shelter, shelter," deprecated the host. "Course, if Hammon' marry some fine lady like his mamma (and I'm a-countin' on it) he'll prob'bly build her a fine home over on the other knoll and let this place go to quarters. We're cramped fer quarters anyhow; two families with an extrie wench or two in ever' cabin, and the extrie boys bedded down on straw in the stable. It ain't healthy. Come an epizootic and it would ruin us."

A genial fire in the wide fireplace warmed the sitting room into which Mr. Maxwell welcomed his transient guest, who gingerly eased his lean body into a large rocker. The host baked himself in front of the fire, alternately facing it and turning his back to it in an effort to relieve the rheumatic pains that racked his joints.

"Memnon! Memnon!" he called. Before the boy arrived he questioned his guest, "How do you like your corn?"

"Uncontaminated, please, suh, uncontaminated."

"A glass of unwatered whiskey fer the gen'leman and a toddy fer me—hot, mind," the host gave his orders to the Negro.

Brownlee eyed the slave appraisingly. "Right smart boy," he declared. "Ain't fer sale, I reckon."

When Agamemnon returned with the drinks, Brownlee seemed even more interested in the boy than in the whiskey. As the Negro approached to hand him the brimming water goblet, Brownlee reached out and grasped his leg, felt of his muscles critically. "Kneel down," he commanded and ran his hands over the shoulders, opened his mouth and ran his fingers perfunctorily along the sound teeth. " 'Bout thirty, I should say."

"Not that old," observed the master proudly.

"Seems like about thirty, teeth and all. 'Bout a quadroon, I reckon."

" 'Bout that. His dam a mulatto, his sire a white man."

"Fully housebroke, I reckon?" the buyer persisted.

"Yes, but triflin'. Cain't git no work out'n him."

"Sell him to me and I'll cure that quick."

"And he back talks too. I been laying off to hang him up and have him hided fer quite a spell, but whut with the rheumatiz and all, I put it off and put it off."

"No, no, Masta, suh," the boy began a plaintive wail. "I's spry nigger; don't hide me; I'll be good. No, no, Masta. I'll—"

"Dry up," the master warned. "See whut I mean?" he addressed himself to Brownlee. "He's al'ays puttin' his mouth into white folk's talk. He's a kind of pet of my son, and Ham has ruint him. My son don't mind if I peel his rump, but he too busy to do it hisself."

"Reckon you don't want to sell him then?" interposed the trader.

"No, I reckon not."

An irregular step sounded on the creaking floor of the hall and Hammond Maxwell limped in. "Sorry, suh, about keeping dinner," he explained to his father. "I rid around agin to see how the river is comin' up after the rainin'."

"Don't spoil your dinner with concernment." Maxwell turned to address his guest, "This son of mine is much too ponderous. His only fault, only fault, suh, is that he loves this damned leeched out plantation and its blacks more than he loves white ladies. Mr. Brownlee—that's the correct cognomen, ain't it?—Mr. Brownlee, suh, this is my Hammond; named for his grandsire, suh, Theophilus Hammond."

"Right charmed by the honor of your company," responded Hammond cordially.

"Thankee, suh. Right charmed my own self," said Brownlee, rising and extending his hand.

"Mr. Brownlee goin' about the country purchasin' negras fer the New Orleans block. Cain't make a sizeable coffle and so he drop by Falconhurst to look over our stock. Do yo' reckon we kin accommodate him with a buck or two?"

"Don't reckon we kin deny a gen'leman in need. Might hap we kin spare something," Ham encouraged Brownlee, his hospitality overweighing his contempt for the profession of his guest. "But dinner awaits us. May I escort you, suh, into the other room, whure we'll partake of a slight repas'?"

"Yes, it's gitting on to one and you must be wolf-hungry, Son, after all mornin' in the saddle," declared the father with some concern, as he led the way into the dining room.

It was an immense, bare apartment, its size only modified by the height of the ceilings. Against one wall stood a wide sideboard of the Empire period, mahogany, overly ornate, but with some claim to distinction of taste. Its surface, however, was so cluttered with rococo silver and glass as to destroy what dignity it might have possessed.

The large rectangular table shrank to mediocrity in the middle of the long, tall room. It was covered by a cloth of heavy damask in a checkerboard pattern of red and white, small in the center, the border of larger squares. In the very center of the table stood a tall revolvable silver or silver-plated caster with cruets of condiments and jars of various kinds of pickles. From its upright handle were suspended two pairs of tongs and around its perimeter dangled a fringe of silver teaspoons.

On one corner of the table stood a tall, glass pitcher of thick, yellow milk, something midway between milk and cream. Places were laid for three. The pinkish willow-ware plates were enormous, ornamented with pictures of Chinese temples and pagodas. Each was flanked with a bone-dish of the same ware. The substantial knives and forks were of steel, their bone handles streaked with yellow from too long boiling in dishwater. The empty coffee cups that stood at the right of each cover, each handle meticulously turned to the exact right of each cup, were on the same oversized scale as the plates. Tall goblets of heavy pressed glass, each holding upright in its bowl a red napkin starched and ironed to display its fringed border, stood behind the cups.

Except for the pickles in the caster jars, and salt in capacious open dishes of heavy, red glass, no food was visible.

Despite that there were no flies to be brushed on this chilly day, except for three or four that crawled languidly across the ceiling and didn't threaten the food, two sleek boys of something over four feet tall (Maxwell would have estimated them at twelve hands, two or three inches) stood, one on each side of the table, waving fans of frayed peacock-tail feathers, monotonously and tirelessly to and fro. The trader began his evaluation of the boys the moment he set eyes upon them. Here was something choice, something fancy. What a price these two would fetch at private treaty in New Orleans! He knew exactly the men, the persons, who would be interested. The bumper of whiskey he had drunk enlarged his imagination. Perhaps these rustics had no comprehension of the value of such a brace in the right market, of the purposes for which they could be sold, of the uses to which they could be put. Either, alone, was a jewel. Together, as a span, twins, they would bring four or five times what they would bring singly.

He continued to look surreptitiously at the little knaves, fearing the while that his excess of interest might be surmised.

As he glanced askancedly from one to the other, he was not able to detect a trace of difference. The contours of closely shorn skulls were exactly alike, the same round faces with full cheeks, the same noses only slightly flat with nostrils somewhat large, the same neat ears, the same large full mouths turned upward at the corners, the same large eyes with irises so black that it was impossible to detect that they had pupils. The facial skins were alike in color and in texture—a light amber through which shone a rosiness around the cheek bones. Their fine skins appeared burnished, but it

was with health and the soft soap that had been recently applied to render them fit for service in their master's dining room.

Down to their small, arched, bare feet they were made alike, height, arm length, leg length, flatness of chest, roundness of buttock. It was not by design that they were uniformly clad, because the small boys on Falconhurst after six or eight were all dressed alike in rough shirts and rougher pants, which were their only garments. Before six or eight, often up to ten, boys wore nothing at all, although girls were clothed a little earlier. The boys' clothes were uniform, also, in their age and drabness—it could not be called color.

The habiliments of the twins differed somewhat from those of the boys destined for field duty in that they were comparatively, only comparatively, whole, and differed markedly in that they were clean—looked clean and looked as if they might even smell clean—immaculate. One of the boys, it makes no difference which, for they were exactly alike and their clothes were interchangeable, had a fringed hole in the thigh of his pants which gave the appearance of having been darned, the darned patch having worn out or failed to hold and of somebody's, seamstress' or tailor's or wardrobe keeper's, having given up in despair. The other boy was candidly out of breech. The holes served to show that their likeness of pigmentation didn't stop at the neckline but was as great under their clothes as at their extremities.

Somebody had tied a red-faded-to-pink ribbon around the arm of one boy, and a blue-faded-to-gray ribbon around the arm of the other—ostensibly to tell them apart. Possibly they had done it one to the other lest they get themselves mixed. Or perhaps it was ordained by God in order that He might charge aright their peccadillos in the Book of Judgment. Of outright sin He couldn't accuse them. Such cherubim were incapable of sin and besides they had no sense of sin, but they could be guilty of such things as laughing in the presence of their betters, of yelling in their play, or reminding the other that he was a nigger or a bastard, or of forgetting to wield the peacock fan with fitting rhythm.

Brownlee's survey of the room and his evaluation of the twins were rapid. It took no more time than for Agamemnon to withdraw the chair, horse-hide covered, and to seat his rheumatic master at the head of the table, after which he pulled out Brownlee's chair and seated him. Hammond dispensed with the Negro's assistance and sat down at the side of the table opposite Brownlee, whose liquorish eye continued to steal glances at the boys. His appetite was not for food, despite his morning's journey, as he flicked the red napkin from the glass, unfolded it and tucked it carefully into his collar.

However, the odor of the food Agamemnon fetched from the kitchen and placed on the table revived his hunger. First to arrive was an immense platter of stewed chicken enveloped with dumplings, which one had only to look at to see by the manner in which they fell apart that they were tender as tissue. This was followed by another platter on which rested slice after center slice of fried ham surrounded by the red gravy in which it had been

cooked. A third platter contained eggs, something more than a dozen of them, fried on one side only, their vivid yellow yolks set in their clear white margins making them appear like a bouquet of immense daisies.

Next to be handed about was a heaped up dish of boiled potatoes, followed by tender spring greens on which reposed a large piece of bacon.

Agamemnon filled the glasses with the creamy milk from the pitcher, after which he fetched from the kitchen a heaped up plate of large hot biscuits, redolent of an excess of saleratus, at once pleasant and repugnant, as is the odor of sweat.

Agamemnon next filled the cups from a battered tin pot of strong, black, and hot coffee, upon which he floated cream so thick that it oozed from the pitcher in only semi-liquidity. He then passed a pitcher of light colored molasses with which the coffee was to be sweetened, and for which Maxwell found occasion to apologize.

"We likes long-sweet'nin' better than short-sweet'nin'," he explained. "Must be some hard sugar around here, somers, though Ham and me never touches it. We likes the tanginess of the long."

"Long-sweet'nin' always bes'," agreed Brownlee as he poured his coffee into the saucer and blew upon it.

"Course, there too much tang to black-strap fer a white man. This is first run molasses. Too costive to feed to the negras. Black-strap good enough fer them."

"Shore is," Brownlee again agreed, raising to his mouth a chicken leg from which the meat threatened to drop. "But you don't feed your niggers sugar of no kin'?" he asked in mild amazement.

"They gets black-strap ever' day they lives."

"But it don't grow 'em none and jest stirs their craving fer vittles—makes 'em eat more. It's sheer waste," said the incredulous dealer.

"I wants my niggers to eat. The more they eats, the more they grows. Don't believe in stintin' niggers and paying it out to veternarians."

"Besides," added Brownlee, "it rots niggers' teeth."

Maxwell chuckled knowingly, "Jest a granny tale, a granny tale. My niggers gits molasses on their pone ever' day and kin you find a rotten set of teeth on this plantation, I'll give you the nigger. 'Zamine any of 'em."

Brownlee accepted the cue. Half pushing back his chair, he beckoned to the boy behind it. "Come here, boy," he ordered. The embarrassed boy sidled to obey. Brownlee embraced him with his left arm, incidentally inserting his hand through the hole in the breech and caressing it, while with his right hand he opened the boy's mouth and prolonged his exploration of it. The boy cringed and sought gently to wiggle away, which Hammond saw.

"Alph," he adjured, "let that white man feel you in the mouth. Cravin' me to hang you up?"

The boy was only able to grunt his negative answer to the rhetorical question without pinching the white finger between his teeth.

The other boy sniggered, more embarrassed than amused at his brother's even greater embarrassment. "Stop that titterin', Meg," Hammond warned, "or I'll have to hide the both of you. You aims to break fer a house nigger, doesn't you? Don't want to be no common fiel' han'?"

Brownlee relinquished Alph and summoned the other twin. "Meg?" he questioned as he grasped him. " 'Tarnal quaint to call a buck a gal's name? Is it acause he's altered?" and overtly felt of the genitals which he was disappointed to find flaccid.

"Hell, no, he ain't altered," the elder Maxwell ejaculated, indignant at the idea of his castrating a Negro. "Feel him," which Brownlee continued to do. "No altered horse or niggers on this plantation."

Hammond interpolated an explanation as much to suppress his father's anger at the implied accusation as to enlighten the stranger about the name of the boy. "Meg is a shavin' down of 'Omega'! Omega and Alpha, you know, Alpha and Omega."

"I don't know nothin' about them Roman gods, but I do know a little about niggers, and this a likely little buck. Don't reckon you'd care to market this yoke?"

Hammond laughed as he answered, "We'd starve an' if we sol' 'em. The cook would have a hissie; they're hern."

"She'd rally in three days, jest like the balance of 'em; and I'm primed to shell out fer a span like this—know jest whure I kin git shet of 'em."

"They pets, kinda like. Papa and me both thinks they cunning. I guess we'll sort of keep 'em fer seed," Hammond declined the proposal without discourtesy to his guest.

The elder Maxwell was still incensed at the inference of the castration of the boy and returned to the subject. "I never gentled a nigger in my life, my daddy never did and my grand-daddy never did. I never even threats 'em. They'd run, and it would serve me right. I wouldn't blame 'em."

"No rudeness intended, suh," Brownlee sought to mollify him. "Lots of gen'lemen nips their house bucks or their bad niggers. I gets lots of 'em."

"Eatin' and fornicatin', about all a nigger got to live fer—or a human either, so fur as that concerns," Maxwell philosophized with an air of profundity. "Course, also, a wench enjoys the suckin' of her young."

Brownlee, who did not enjoy so abstract a conversation, changed it. "The eatin' part is mighty good on your plantation, suh, if this meal is any test."

"Eat hearty, suh, eat hearty," urged the host. "Might as well clean up the vittles. The leavin's are jest scraped to the servants anyways."

"Great sufficiency, suh, great sufficiency," declared Brownlee, slurping the last saucerful from his fourth cup of coffee. "Scrumptious meal, scrumptious meal, suh." He withdrew the napkin from his neck, folded it carefully and politely and laid it beside his plate. Then, following the procedures of his hosts, he pushed back his chair and arose, brushed the crumbs from his garments, and, in dumb-show compliment of the dinner he had eaten, rubbed

his belly and loosened the bottom button of his vest.

"Nothin' extrie, nothin' extrie. Jest the general run of dinner," Maxwell depreciated the compliment paid to his food, and guided by Memnon's solicitude although Mem didn't even touch his arm, led the way back to the sitting room.

"Now about those servants you offerin' to sell me," Brownlee persisted, sinking in his chair before the fireplace.

"Mem, put some chunks on that fire. Never think of nothin'. Have to be told. Room's got right bleak," Maxwell scolded the boy before he answered Brownlee. He was reluctant to discuss the transaction. "Well, let's see," he said. "Whut you reckon, Ham?"

Hammond showed less reluctance. "Well, s'pose we drags out that Preacher and that lean, brown boy named Emperor?"

"Changed Preacher's name to Barbarosa," corrected the father. "That's good. They all right, an' you say."

"They brisk and lively? How big are they?"

"One about fifteen hands, three inches, I reckon. You saw him. He barned your horse. The other taller, mayhap close to seventeen hands—but they got a spell of growin' in 'em yet. They not plumb growed. Yes, they right vig'ous and frisky. They'll make good hands," the elder Maxwell affirmed.

"They ain't unsound, but they not sound neither, not quite exactly prime," Hammond warned.

"I was jest calculatin'," replied the trader, "That Preacha' is kin' of cripped, ain't he? Toes off one foot?"

"Not cripped. It don't slow him down none," said Hammond. "Of course, if you don't crave him—"

"It's all right, it's all right. A nigger's a nigger—of course, at a price."

"Of course," Hammond agreed.

"What ails the other'n?" inquired Brownlee.

"A burned scar; don't ruin him none, but Papa and me, we don't like to shovel feed into a boy that don't strip down purty. Falconhurst negras are right sound and we wants to keep 'em so. We right proudish over havin' good stock without'n blemish or blight. Our only reason fer cheapening these boys."

"How bad is the burning and how did he gain it?"

"Soap kettle boiled over on him, hit him right in the stommick and trickled down on his privates and on one flank. Big scar, but all healed over nice. A little murrey yet in blotches, but about cleaned up when I look at it a month or like that back."

"I'll look at him," said Brownlee.

"We don't warrant you could breed him; kind of sealed together down there, but it never gentled him, not a bit."

"If'n he kin cut cane and pick cotton, I kin use him—of coursen, with allowance fer price."

"Memnon, gather up them two boys, Preach and Emp; shuck 'em down; and give 'em a hunk of hard soap. Tell 'em to go down to the river and wash all over good, and then come on back here and tarry in front of the gallery." Hammond gave instruction. "And sen' fer my hoss."

"You ain't goin' out, Son. It's rainin' right down."

"Got to see after that passel cutting stove wood up beyond that fur clearin'. Not a hand would cut a stick if I wasn't there to drive them."

"Don't want you to ketch your death, Son, a-workin' in this kin' of weather—cold and rain."

"Don't fret yourself, Papa," said the boy. "I'm warm dressed and waterproof."

"Whut am I goin' to rate Mr. Brownlee fer them boys?" the senior asked.

"Whutever's right and fair," the boy replied. "You've had more truck in that kind of messin' than ever I had." He bent over and kissed his father, bowed to the trader and was gone.

The father sighed, arose and trudged painfully to the cloudy window on which he wiped a space through which to watch his son mount his horse.

"That boy is too ardent and aspirin'. That's whut he is. Didn't git it from my side of the house. Got it from old Theophilus Hammond, I reckon. Took his outside after me and his innards after the Hammonds. Got my red face and my blue eyes, only lighter, my long body and short legs—everything, but got Hammond stubbornness and git-up-and-git. Works too hard and don't take no young fun. Best boy a father ever had I reckon, but works too hard. Only fault I got to find with him.

"Memnon, Memnon," he called.

"Yas, suh, Masta," the boy responded.

"A toddy, hot fer me. Your pleasure, suh?"

"Jest a swallow of plain corn, an' you please, suh. Jest a mouthful," replied the guest.

"You heard Mista Brownlee. Git him whut he wantin'. And have my toddy hot."

"Yessum, suh."

Agamemnon fetched the ordered drinks and Mr. Brownlee accepted his without demur despite that it was larger than the normal mouth could hold. It was, in fact, plain whiskey in as large and full a goblet as Maxwell's toddy. He took several deep swallows while Maxwell, as usual after cautioning Memnon to make it hot, found it necessary to set his concoction aside to cool to a temperature that would not scald his mouth and throat.

Despite Brownlee's anxiety to inspect his prospective purchases, Maxwell chose to enjoy awhile in anticipation the pleasure he knew would be his in conducting the transaction. He surmised how ardent the trader was to buy, and was confident to wait until his fish had fully swallowed the hook. He leisurely sipped his toddy, setting the goblet down from time to time while he rubbed his aching knees or massaged one hand with the other, as

he baked his shins before the fire. There were but few days in the year in Alabama cold enough to justify the use of the fireplaces, and Maxwell relished the cheer of a crackling log.

"Hammond think this a cotton plantation," he observed, "Falconhurst ain't a cotton plantation at all. It a nigger farm, that whut it is, a nigger farm. It's been cropped and cropped fer cotton year after year till there ain't no more cotton in the dirt. It's all wore out and dreened away down the Tombigbee. No matter how hard Hammon' work, he do good if he make a quarter of a crop. Some spots cain't grow more than a good bale on fifty acres, and of that the staple is so short that the factor in New Orleans seconds it, even thirds it."

Brownlee was but little interested in Alabama cotton economy. Every little while he arose and paced to the window and looked at the two nude Negroes waiting patiently beneath a tupelo tree that partially shielded them from the wind-driven rain.

By way of making conversation, he inserted in his host's soliloquy the observation, "Slow way of living, seems like. Takes a tol'able spell to breed a nigger and raise it up to market."

"Not long, not long. Time passes fast, come my age. Turn past forty and the burying ground stares you right in the face all the time. Cain't escape it; fact, don't crave to, whut with the rheumatiz and all. Course, I'd like to live long enough to marry Hammond to some young lady, some lady of right nice family, some lady of good blood, who would bring him a son to carry on the Maxwell name. Hammon', he is good blooded, hisself—grandson of old Theophilus Hammond of Anglebranch Plantation.

"Hammon' married and a son comin' up, I'll be ready to meet my Maker. Not afraid, not one bit. Course, I ain't never had much truck with preachers and things like that, but I always tried to do right, never cheated no white man in a trade, treated my niggers good, fed 'em good, never worked 'em on Sundays—barring cotton picking time—never sold a child without its dam before it was well weaned and seldom then, never chased after white whores, and never danced a jig. I've guzzled a good deal of corn whiskey, yes; but I could hold it, never was hoggish like, and I never was drunk in my life after Ham begun to grow up. Wanted to set him a good model. Never done nothin' to be ashamed of hardly. Expect to pass muster when the roll is called up yander."

Brownlee was less concerned about Maxwell's virtue and its reward than about the deal in Negroes. He made another excursion to the window. "That burn on that buck is middlin' bad," he observed.

"Jest looks that way through that wrinkled pane. That winder light is all wavy. Ain't nothin' at all, scarcely. But Hammond jest cain't abide a nigger on the place that ain't perfect. Funny that way. Mayhap it reminds him of his own stiff leg which he got from that pony gelding when he was six years old. His mamma didn't want he should have a pony so young. She warned

me, but I've got a stubborn streak too. Besides the little feller wanted a pony, wanted it bad. I never could suffer that child to crave nothin' and to not git it. I cain't yet. That spotted pony seemed gentle when I traded for it, but you cain't never trust a gelding, horse or nigger. They villainous and double-hearted. The varmint throwed the boy off the third day he had him, bucked him right off withouten no reason at all. I didn't think the boy was hurt none, but I toted him into the house (didn't trust him to no nigger) and laid him down on that very lounge there in the corner, eased his cryin', undressed him gentle-like as I could, and rubbed him down with whiskey. Lucretia Borgia, the cook, that is, suckin' them two twins—the two you saw in the dining room—and her and I give the babies to Ham fer a bribe to let her rub him with whiskey ever' day. Didn't do no good, howsumever. His knee stiffened up. Cain't scarcely bend it at all."

Brownlee was less interested in Hammond's stiff knee than in the Negroes in the dooryard. "We better look after them boys out there. Standing nekid in this drivin' rain is liable to give 'em lung fever or somethin'."

"Won't hurt 'em none as long as they nekid. It's wet clothes that makes 'em sick. Besides, they got enough sense to stand under that tupelo gum, ain't they? Jest wait till I dreen this toddy glass. It's cooled off now and purty near empty."

Brownlee returned to the fire, but did not sit down.

Maxwell swallowed the last of his toddy and Brownlee made a gesture to help the rheumatic to rise. "Nev' min', never mind," protested the latter, struggling to his feet. "Memnon, Memnon," he called. "Wrap that coverlid off the lounge there around my shoulders."

Warmly mantled in blue and white, Maxwell led the way through the hall to the front doors, which Agamemnon opened for him, guiding his way down the single step to the verandah. The Negro brought rocking chairs, but only his master sat down. Brownlee, in his concern to get down to business, continued to stand and Agamemnon to hover about his master for the primary purpose of overhearing the negotiations.

"Git them boys up here onto this gallery and sop that rain offn 'em," Maxwell ordered Agamemnon, drawing a soiled bandana from his pocket and heaving it toward him. "Mr. Brownlee craves to finger 'em over."

The two young Negroes approached the gallery with misgivings. They had never been permitted to come so close to the house, and, now that they were summoned, they were aware of their muddy feet. Both shivered as much from fear as from cold. Preach's teeth chattered but the mouth of the lanky Emperor was so much overshot that his teeth failed to meet and the convulsions of his jaw made no sound.

Agamemnon, degraded to the place of valet to a field hand, chose the lighter-hued Emperor as the lesser evil and dabbed at him gingerly with the handkerchief, after which, with a glance askance in the direction of his master, he tossed the wet handkerchief to Preach who proceeded to wring it out

and wipe the standing drops from his body. To dry himself on the wet rag was impossible.

Brownlee took charge of Emp, made a preliminary pass of his hands over the goose-pimpled back and skinny leg, after which he turned his attention to the big cicatrix which was firmly healed and could not be forced to open or bleed for all the pommeling and pinching the trader gave it. Emperor had been inured to pain by the burn and the treatment it had undergone, and he did not flinch.

"Purty ganglin'," deplored Brownlee. "Narrow shouldered and stooped over."

"I know he ain't ready to sell yet. Needs a year on him. Besides he ain't been fattened and primed," countered the owner.

"Terrible pig-jawed, too."

"Don't want him to chew the cane down, do you?" Maxwell replied. "Hog-mouth don't stop him from eatin' like a hog."

"One of them honery beyond Good Hope varmints, from up around Zanzibar I reckon," said Brownlee sinking into his chair with disapproval.

"Mayhap. I don't know nothin' about his breedin'. Might be some East Coast blood in him. But it's bred out'n him by this time. Leastwise he never give me no trouble. Never had to lay whup to him."

"Kneel down here in front of me, boy," the dealer ordered. "No, not that a-way—back to me."

Emp turned around and, despite the absence of visible wales, Brownlee carefully explored the muscles beneath the skin for ridges that would betray the healed-over marks of the whip.

He continued his conversation with Maxwell while he ran his experienced hands over the Negro's back. "Might not be troublous, but in the city put an East Coast nigger on the block and you cain't git no hids. Them Louisiana planters ain't a-goin' to run no chances of buyin' trouble. But his back's clean."

"I told you I never snaked him."

"Somebody else might of before you gotten him, not doubtin' your word," said Brownlee, pushing the boy forward, face to floor, so that he might spread the meager buttocks and examine the anus for hemorrhoids, of which he found no signs. He then pulled the boy upright onto his knees, tilted his head back and ran his fingers along the teeth, which despite the malformed lower jaw were as sound as if their cusps had fitted together normally. Getting Emp to his feet, he pulled and twisted his fingers, and, finding none broken, stiff, or badly twisted, signaled him by a grasp of the calf to lift the feet, one at a time to the arm of the chair that he might examine the toes.

"Bring me that wood piece out there, boy," he commanded, indicating a small scrap of lumber some ten feet away. He rose and, throwing it as far as he was able, said, "Now fetch." Emperor loped toward it.

Brownlee turned to Memnon, who stood behind his owner's chair, and

ordered, "Fetch me my cow-hide. You'll find it in there somers, mayhap on the fireplace."

Maxwell interrupted Memnon's, "Yas, suh," to warn, "You not a-goin' to use it on my niggers. I do my own whuppin'."

"Jest goin' to wrap it about his laigs a few times to make him hustle hisself. Got to see kin he run. Wasn't a-goin' to hurt him none," the dealer explained, taken somewhat aback.

"Never mind, never mind, he'll gallop," the master replied to the buyer. "Never mind, Memnon," he countermanded. Maxwell was wearied with the tedious minuteness of examination of a boy that was conceded not to be sound anyway. His patience was wearing.

"You throw," Brownlee yielded the retrieved wood to Memnon, who threw it much farther than Brownlee had. "Go, fetch," Brownlee gave the word to Emperor, who ran languidly after it and brought it back—an indifferent performance.

"Listen to me, yaller boy," Maxwell took Emp in hand. "You jest lazy. You kin trot with more spunk than that. If you spoil the trade with your balkiness, I'm goin' to hang you up by your heels and make Memnon pour it on your yaller rind until you wisht you had showed some speed while you had a chanst. Unerstan'? I'll wallop you till you cain't even walk. I'll take the laziness out of your bones. Now, go fetch."

"Yas, suh, Masta."

Emp ran as fast as he was able, but the distance was not great enough to enable him to gather his full speed. Brownlee appeared to be satisfied. "Now jump," he said. "Higher! Higher!"

Maxwell was ready to terminate the transaction. "Put that boy away," he addressed Memnon. "Mr. Brownlee not in'ested. He wants prime niggers. Have him go—"

"Wait a minute, wait a minute, Mr. Maxwell, suh. I kin use that buck. I craves to buy him," Brownlee interrupted.

"Don't seem like, suh," Maxwell showed his impatience.

"How much you want fer him, suh?" the colloquy grew formal.

"Ought to be worth six fifty," Maxwell ventured, tentatively.

"Too much. Cain't use him at that price. Cain't git more than seven fer him in New Orleans."

"Six twenty-five, then?"

"Wait; let me look at the other'n. Maybe we kin deal on the two of 'em."

Preacher was cold and shaking, but he slouched forward for his examination. He was no longer afraid and showed no more feeling of his indignity than his fellow had displayed. He knew that he was mere property which had changed ownership before.

"Pity about that foot," cheapened the dealer. "How'd it come?"

"Horse stomped it, I believe. Otherwise a sound hand."

Brownlee grunted. He pursued his inspection much as he had inspected Emperor.

"An Angola," he disparaged.

"Don't know no more about his breedin' than about the other'n. Angola or not, he's peart and vig'rous."

"But Angolas don't sell good. Buyers afraid they'll come down. The least ailment carries 'em off, and a good hidin' lays 'em by fer a month. Course, fer myself, I don't care; but buyers are slow to bid 'em in."

"I reckon you don't want nothin' but Mandingos and Fulahs," said Maxwell contemptuously.

"Well, they're good niggers, 'specially Mandingos."

Brownlee speeded up his examination of Preach, sensing Maxwell's growing irritation, but his canvass was none the less minute. He reached the back which was apparently clean. His exploratory fingers detected a wale beneath the skin, further down he felt another. "They is ridges here. This varmint's been lashed."

"Whure?" Maxwell struggled to his feet, incredulous.

"Right here and here. Feel."

"I'll be swanned if he ain't. I disremember ever hiding him, don't think I did—not snake him anyway. Did I, Barber?" he sought confirmation.

"Naw, suh," the boy answered.

"Who did, then?"

"Masta Johnson, overseer for Masta Knowlton, up to Knowlton Knoll Plantation, afore you bought me," explained the boy. "Ol' Masta laugh while Masta Johnson skun me and then rub salt and pepper in my meat." The black boy burst into tears at the recollection.

"Nev' min'; all over now; salt and pepper heals it up," declared Maxwell with a tone of tenderness. "Queer that I skipped them ridges when I bought him. Bigger then than now, too."

"Angola," sneered Brownlee. "Cain't stand a little threshing."

"Whut'd he skin you fer? Whut you done?" inquired the master.

Preach was too black to blush. He hung his head and ceased to sob.

"Answer me whut you done," Maxwell commanded firmly.

"I—, I—," Preach hesitated and then muttered with embarrassment, "Masta cotched me in the straw—a-playin'."

Maxwell was amused. "I never hide a young buck fer that. Jest tell 'em it will drop off and scare 'em like. Howsumever, it don't do no good."

"Only thing to cure it is a wench," enunciated Brownlee.

"Maybe, maybe."

"It pays; it pays."

"Reckon you not in'erested in a scarred-backed boy?" Maxwell ventured.

"At a price, at a price," said Brownlee, continuing his survey.

Preach was better than Emperor had been in the test for activity. He was stronger thewed, more alert, and, not being so tall, was not so much

hampered by the shortness of the distance he was forced to retrieve the stick.

"Whut you want fer this one?" asked Brownlee.

" 'Bout seven hundred, I reckon, more or less," Maxwell had reached the price part of the trade, which he enjoyed bickering about.

"Cain't give it and git out whole. How much fer the two of 'em?"

"How much I ask you fer the yaller one? Six hundred twenty-five, weren't it? And seven hundred fer this one. That's, that's, let's see. I'm kind of slow cipherin' in my head. Thirteen, twenty-five, ain't it? Make it twelve hundred and a half fer the span of 'em. Cheap enough."

"Cain't cut 'er," parried the trader. "Make it, say, about—"

"Ain't no good. Twelve fifty's my best price. Take 'em or quit 'em. It's jest accommodation. I ain't anxious to trade."

Brownlee perceived a finality in Maxwell's statement which the latter had not intended to put into it. Brownlee seemed about to retire.

"Oh, make it even twelve hundred," Maxwell conceded.

"They unsound," argued the dealer, running his hand over Emperor's scar. "I'm sorry, but I jest cain't git out at that price."

"Tell you whut!" proposed Maxwell, as if the concept had just occurred to him. "S'pose you trade in them three young 'uns of yourn out in the stable on these two bucks."

"Wouldn't trade 'em in. Might trade even," parried the trader.

"Let's see 'em," Maxwell turned to Memnon, "You got the keys to 'em. Git 'em."

While Agamemnon was gone on his errand, their master gave the two boys permission to go into a cabin and get warm. "Try Dido's cabin. She got a good fire about this time; cookin'."

"You cain't git shet of them little saplin's in New Orleans," began Maxwell.

"The bucks are big enough and the wench will pass good fer eleven. A loony kind of law, anyway," declared Brownlee.

"I don't mean the Louisianie law agin sellin' young saplings. Everybody know that loony. Got little niggers, ought to could sell 'em when anybody craves to. Ain't nobody's business," affirmed Maxwell. "Whut I calculate is that them chilern of yourn cain't do nothin' yet, ain't worth nothin' on the market. I reckon you know that and bought 'em up cheap. Keep 'em three, four, five year and they'll be real saleworthy."

"Whure'll I keep 'em? Cain't keep 'em cheap in New Orleans. I bought 'em to sell. Want to git my money and buy more niggers."

"Just whut I mean; jest whut I mean. Trade 'em to me fer them two young bucks that are able to work and jest right fer the market. I'll grow the young 'uns here whure feed is cheap and you kin come back and buy 'em off'n me when they're growed up and ripened. Course I aims to look 'em over before there's a swap."

There seemed to Brownlee to be no flaw in Maxwell's argument. Mem-

non appeared from the direction of the stables, followed by the two boys. He led the small girl by the hand. Exhausted by their morning journey, they had been asleep and were now but half awake. The fist of one boy was in his eye, which might well have provided a cue to the other—the one with a cold—for pus, dried and granulated, had accumulated on the edges of his lids. The girl was the most happy and animated of the trio.

"Shuck 'em down," ordered Maxwell. "I don't crave to feel of the little shoats without washing 'em. But it too col' now with the sun about to down. If they was washed, we could take 'em in the house whure it warm."

Memnon had peeled the garments from the two boys, and the girl, releasing the single button, had pulled her dress off over her head.

Maxwell made no such detailed examination as Brownlee had made of the older boys. He delegated most of it to Memnon. The boys were of approximately the same age, both bronze mulattoes, the one with the cold darker than the other. Obviously not twins, they were similar in make and shape, well rounded but sturdy and hard of muscle, considering their youth. Maxwell remarked about their resemblance and Brownlee answered him, "Same pappy prob'bly. I bought 'em from the same breeder—hard up but wouldn't sell his grown stock."

Maxwell perfunctorily felt of their thighs and calves, scrutinized the navel of one that he suspected of having a hernia, commanded Memnon to open the mouths that he might examine the teeth, and declared himself satisfied.

The girl was not pretty but she was animated and appealing. She enjoyed the attention given to her and responded instantly to any command. Maxwell appraised her quickly. Yellow, approximately quadroon, she had small bones, lightly fleshed. Her breasts were just beginning to swell but she was far short of nubility.

"Virgin, I reckon?" Maxwell inquired.

"Was, yes; I don't know whut riding astraddle on that crupper might of done to her."

"Look at her Memnon," ordered Maxwell.

The girl found zest in Memnon's exploration. One boy—the one without the coryza—stared fixedly at the proceeding and Brownlee noted his excess of interest, caught him across the rump with the piece of wood he had thrown for Emperor to retrieve. "Watch yourself, boy, watch yourself. Turn around and face away from white folks if you going to be that a-way." The boy turned his back, crying. "S'pose I kin flog my own niggers, even if I cain't wallop yourn," commented Brownlee.

"Not fer that, you cain't. Not here. Let the little shoat enjoy hisself. You cain't change male nature," said Maxwell. "Well," he added, "How will we trade?"

"Even—your two fer my three."

"No, I want a hundred dollars to boot."

"Even."

"Fifty."

"Cain't do better than even. Them two bucks of yourn is unsoun'."

"I don't run down your stock."

"Nothin' to run down. All three sound as gold pieces."

"I never make a trade without boot. I'll tell you whut I'll do, I'll match you—ten dollars or five."

"Hell, I'll give five," conceded the trader.

"Done!" declared Maxwell, sustained in his resolution to obtain some hard cash in each transaction.

"All's to do now is to make out bills of sale."

"And plank down the money boot. But now she's mine, I'll tell you that wench ain't soun'. Anybody kin see she's wormy—worms almos' crawlin' right out of her gizzard. May be only belly-worms, but I reckon they might be a tapeworm. Git her purged shet of her visitors and watch her lay on meat. She ain't so ugly. She jest gant and peaked."

"She's yourn to doctor up however you wantin'. I glad I'm shet of the clay-eatin' little slut," gloated the trader.

"Memnon, you take the pore little thing over to Dido. Tell her to watch them boys of hers around her, because she's not been ruint yet and she'd better not be. And tell Dido not to feed or drink the wench tonight—not a bit and not a drop. That's whut I despise about worming a child—keepin' 'em empty. I like to feed stock and keep it growing. And put some dry rigging on them two boys of Mr. Brownlee's and take 'em back to the stable." Turning to the trader, Maxwell asked, "Want them boys chained up—afraid they'll run tonight? They're yourn now. I wash my hands of 'em."

"Bring 'em back here afore you straw 'em down. I want to give 'em a talkin' to. When I gits finished with 'em they won't run," replied the new owner.

"Bed these two little black bucks in the stall with the other saplings. Let 'em git acquainted. Feed 'em strong and give 'em plenty of clabber. Don't worry about them running tonight; they too petered out to run tonight, and tomorrow they'll know Falconhurst grub so good that you couldn't chase 'em off."

"Yas, suh, Masta," Memnon said.

"And don't fergit to pound up some of them betel nuts tonight fer that wench—pound 'em fine, powder 'em. And don't you try to palm off none of that old, leftover powder. Has to be fresh pounded or it don't half work. About as much as you kin put on a two-bit piece. Sovereignest cure fer worms that ever was—if you kin keep it down 'em."

"That all, Masta, suh?"

"That's enough; look to it that you don't fergit none of whut I told you. Fetch that Barbarosa and Emperor right here to their new master. I'll go in to the fire. Gitting cold and raining yet." Maxwell rose, draped the blue cover-

lid about him and, Memnon holding the door for him, entered the house.

"I'll go with you," Brownlee said to Memnon. "I don't want them two nekid bucks out in this rain."

Agamemnon led the way to Dido's cottage, followed by the three nude striplings, the trader bringing up the rear.

They found Preach and Emp sitting on the puncheon floor on either side of the fireplace over which big Dido was cooking dinner in a pot, a baby clinging to her breast. Four other children, dispersed about the small windowless single room of the cabin, gathered with backs to wall to stare at the strange white man. The two nude boys roused to their feet and moved away from the fire to make way for their betters. Their faces were grim.

Brownlee addressed them: "I'm a-dickering with Mista Maxwell to buy you two boys."

"Yas, suh," they answered in unison.

"How would you like to go with me—to be my niggers?" he said with a kindly tone.

"I likes it here. Masta's good to me," said Emp, and Preach burst into fresh tears.

"I'll be good to you, too."

"You goin' to take us to New Orleans and sell us fer cane han's," protested Emperor.

"Nonsense, no sich thing. If I gets you, you goin' to be stock niggers. Of course we goes by way of New Orleans, whure I got to buy me some more hands; but I got a big plantation up in Kaintuck and I got eighteen or twenty wenches comin' ripe that got to be serviced."

Agamemnon stifled his laughter with his hand. He would have had no impulse to laugh if either of the Maxwells had been present.

Brownlee waited for his information to penetrate the hard skulls. He watched their spines stiffen, their heads lift, and animation suffuse their faces. "Reckon you kin do that kind of work fer me?"

"Sure kin," said Emp, and Preach echoed his words before he could get them both out of his mouth. They looked at each other, hardly able to credit their prospective good fortune.

"Of course, the deal ain't been settle' yet. Your masta wantin' a heap of money fer prime bucks like youens, and I wants to see the kind of babies you bring before I risk turning you to my fine wenches."

The two were nonplussed. "Masta Ham ain't serviced me yet. He savin' me," explained Preach.

"Me neither," added Emperor. "But I kin bring good suckas. I knows I kin, suh. Jest you try me."

"You cain't do nothin', nigger boy. You all burned too bad," Preach seized his advantage. "White gen'man don't need you anyhow. I kin service all his wenches, my own se'f withouten no help."

"I craves the both'n you," said Brownlee, "if I kin set the price right.

We'll know, come mornin'."

He turned to leave the cabin. "They won't run tonight. Don't bother to chain 'em. Put dry clothes on 'em and bed 'em down as usual," he instructed Memnon.

Memnon's mood was not good. He did not relish being made a nursemaid for black field hands. It was beneath his dignity. His rightful place was in the house—in the house, mixing toddies and stirring fires and serving at white men's tables.

He led the small black boys and the two larger ones toward the stables. When out of Brownlee's earshot, Mem emitted a chuckle. "You niggers reckon that white man buyin' you fer service niggers? Why, no white man fool enough to breed you to no shoat, let alone his brood wenches," he explained. "Got to have big likely nigger like me fer that kind of work."

"I kin do it jist as good as you," replied Preach, persistent in his gullibility. "Maybe Emp cain't; he all burned."

"Kin too, good as you kin," chimed in Emperor.

"Plantation up in Kaintucky, Umph!" Memnon went on scornfully. "That white man hain't got no plantation nowhures—nowhures. He nothin' but a nigger buyer—a plain, common, white-trash nigger buyer. Ain't even a gen'man. This Masta Brownlee goin' to buy you, already bought you, to take you with him to New Orleans, goin' to put you all on the sellin' block and sell you all to the highest bidder to cut cane with. Now git in that stall with them other boys and fergit about Kaintucky and them wenches. Breedin' niggers!" muttered Memnon contemptuously, closing and latching the door of the stall.

Preacher and Emperor treasured the assurance Brownlee had given them. They were not going to be divested of their dreams. They boasted to their stall-mates of the ecstasies in store for them, quarreled between themselves about their comparative future fecundities, and could not have been induced to run away by a promise of paradise.

CHAPTER 2

MR. BROWNLEE walked slowly from the quarters toward the house in the waning light. The rain had slacked to such a drizzle that the drippings from the trees as he passed under them wet him more than the rain in the open spaces. It was apparent to the trader that the drizzle was a mere respite from the rain's fury because water filled clouds propelled by a cold wind were approaching from the west. Brownlee was concerned with the weather and speculated about his journey, whether he would be held up for another day or even two or three days at Falconhurst or whether it would be feasible for him to set out again in the morning.

He didn't so much mind riding in the wind and even the falling of light rain was not sufficient to deter him, but the mud he had traversed yesterday and this morning would only be aggravated by the rain that had fallen today and which threatened to come down tonight. The roads would be a morass.

The larger boys, encouraged as might be required by the blacksnake, could travel as fast as he chose to ride his horse over muddy roads for a long distance. He would not have to slow down for them as he had been forced to do by the limited strength of the three saplings he had traded for them. He was impatient to get on, to reach New Orleans, and get his money and profit out of the two slaves—or rather his principal's money, since the capital for his buying expedition was borrowed, the net profits from the sale of whatever Negroes he should buy to be split between him and the gentleman who backed him. These profits would probably be small from this particular foray. Negroes had been few, expensive, unsound, and hard to buy. It was a bullish market and planters were waiting for higher prices—except the few who consented to sell a Negro or two in order to buy food for those held in reserve.

Brownlee chuckled to himself about the lie he had told those boys to fortify their willingness to go along with him. A Negro that changes ownership against his will is likely to give trouble to his new master. Brownlee conceived that his paltering with the boys would hasten their steps across country quite as much as the threat of the whip around their legs.

He entered the darkling house only to find his host huddled over the few embers in the fireplace, in a violent temper, reviling Agamemnon for permitting the fire to die. He was in dire need of a toddy and he wanted candles. Although it was so overcast that it was impossible to see it, the sun's face had just been cut by the horizon and the day had not so completely expired as Maxwell believed. Always impatient of Hammond's absences from him, no matter for how short a time, he was now petulant and worried about the delay of his return from work.

Agamemnon, having duly executed the orders his master had given him, arrived only a few minutes after Brownlee. He came through the dining

room door, his arms piled high with stovewood, all of which he dumped across the andirons.

The dressing down Maxwell administered to the Negro was a masterpiece of invective—sarcasm piled upon abuse and abuse upon vituperation. Memnon absorbed the billingsgate as deserved, without any evaluation of the eloquence. Kneeling before the fire, stirring its embers in an effort to cause the fresh, damp wood to ignite, he did not try to refute his master's argumentation, but turned away his wrath with a softly uttered and contrite, "Yas, suh, Masta, suh," or a "Naw, suh, Masta," whenever he could find room for it in the brief pauses Maxwell made to recover his breath.

Memnon was too polite, perhaps too frightened, to try to escape before his master had exhausted his harangue. He continued to fiddle with the fire long after it was burning brightly in order to give Maxwell a chance to vent his spleen thoroughly. As soon as it was safe to do so, he disappeared, returned with candles, and retired to prepare a toddy for Maxwell and a water tumbler of straight bourbon for Brownlee. He well knew that nothing was more apt to mollify his master's mood than the sip of his toddy.

Dark had well set in before Hammond came. He was tired but cheerful. His father's forebodings had been wasted.

"Evening, Papa," he said, bending to kiss the old man's cheek. "Evenin', Mr. Brownlee. Did Papa gold-brick you into buying them boys?"

"Sho' did," declared Brownlee. "He traded—"

Maxwell postponed telling Ham about the deal by changing the subject. "Gettin' late, Son. I dreaded that something might have mischanced you."

"Nothing could happen," Hammond replied to disparage the older man's apprehensions, backing up to the fire.

"Didn't work them pore niggers to this hour?"

" 'Tain't late. Jest got dark early. And don't worry so much about your niggers. I won't hurt 'em. It's not so much a question of working 'em too much as of makin' them work at all, without'n a blacksnake, and I never tote a snake 'lessen I crave to belt a trifler now and agin. You know that, Papa."

"Snakin's good for 'em. Only way to handle a nigger," interposed Brownlee.

"Not my niggers! Hammon' right. Better to forego a day's stint oncet an' agin than ruin a good hand. A nigger that won't work won't work. That's all they is to it. Better git shet of him."

"Besides," added Hammond, "I rode down to the river agin after I brought the choppers in."

"Still a-comin' up?"

"Still a-risin'. And this rain won't help it none."

"Call Memnon to make you a toddy, Son, and set down and drink it before supper time. It'll rest you some."

Hammond accepted the counsel.

While Memnon was in the room to receive Hammond's instructions, the

elder Maxwell drained his glass and said, "I reckon I'll have another one. Got a mite cold out on that gallery and this damned triflin' nigger let the fire go out. Feel my rheumatiz a-tunin' up. Guess I better have another. Mr. Brownlee, suh?"

"Mighty good likker," assented the dealer.

"Tell me about the sale," broached Hammond again. "Did Papa take your eye teeth, Mr. Brownlee?"

"Mighty nigh," answered the trader.

Maxwell sensed that the time had come that he could no longer postpone the confession he had so far evaded. "Spittin' out the right of the matter, it wasn't a sale," he began.

"No?" inquired Hammond.

"No, it was a sort of swop, so to speak—although I got boot," he hastened to add, and reiterated, "I got boot, by golly."

When Memnon appeared with the drinks, Maxwell seized the chance to digress again. "Git your Masta Ham's carpet slippers and slip 'em on his feet to rest 'em. Cain't you ever see he petered? Cain't you ever do nothin' without'n tellin'?"

The questions were baffling to Memnon, but they required acknowledgment if not answers. "Yas, suh; naw, suh," he replied, letting the master choose a reply to suit himself.

"Whut sort of swop?" persisted Hammond relentlessly, as Memnon brought his slippers, knelt in front of him and, bracing foot to belly, drew off his knee-high boots, after which he peeled off his woolen socks, ran his fingers between the toes to remove the moisture, massaged the ball of the foot and rubbed the instep before he affixed the thick, awkward and oversized slippers, constructed of Brussels carpet of so large a design that the slippers did not appear to be mates. Hammond had surrendered himself to the servant's ministrations, taken no cognizance of what was being done to his feet and, ignoring Memnon after he had finished the chore, risen to his feet, and passed his hands over his rump to relieve the toasting it had received while he was on his knees. "Whut sort of swop?" Hammond was forced to repeat.

"Well, to tell true, Mista Brownlee had three little striplings when he rode up, a couple of young bucks nigh on to fifteen hands high, about, and a nice little yaller wench."

"I seen 'em chained up down in the stables. And you, I s'pose, swopped the two big bucks fer 'em?" The tone of the question betrayed vexation.

"But I got boot, I got boot," protested the father. Brownlee abstained from argument.

"How much boot? Didn't have a boot a-comin' to you, seems like to me."

"Only fi' dollars—but boot is boot."

Maxwell sensed Hammond's displeasure and rubbed his arthritic knuckles as if to invite sympathy. His face clouded as if he were about to weep. "I

thought I was makin' a good trade. Mayhap I'm losin' my grip, mayhap even my mind."

"Now, now, Papa. You're all right," Ham saw the distress his criticism had caused. He rose from his chair, shuffled across the room, gently grasped one of the distorted hands and soothed it with light friction. "No, no; you made a good trade. It's jest that instead of gittin' money out of two niggers, here you've gone and added another—and got no money."

"Fi' dollars."

"Yes, five dollars. You jest cain't lay eyes on a likely little nigger without havin' it. Falconhurst is crawling with young niggers—two deep—nowheres to grow no cotton and no hands big enough to work it."

"As I always says, Falconhurst ain't no cotton growin' plantation. Jest a nigger farm, a nigger nu'sery," the elder man justified himself.

"Papa, if you want another little servant, you a-goin' to have another little servant. Ain't nobody goin' to try to balk you, least of all me. You all are still the master of Falconhurst, Papa, and I'll stack your gumption in a nigger trade up against what little I've learned from you, anytime." Hammond patted and relinquished the hand and returned to his chair to swallow the remainder of his toddy. The older man felt good; the pain had miraculously abdicated his joints. Hammond's approval and the evidence of his affection were all the medication he required.

"You in charge of Falconhurst now, Son. I don't want to do nothin' without'n your nod."

Agamemnon threw open the door to the dining room and sounded the supper bell. Supper was much like dinner had been, except that the table was lighted by two candles, supplemented by two others held high but not too steadily by the twins. There were no flies to be brushed in the chilly room at that hour. Candlelight made the ceiling appear even higher and the room more cavernous than it had seemed in daylight.

There was much sameness about the meals at Falconhurst, but there was always plenty of plain and filling food—chicken, pork, and hot bread.

"Pitch right in and hit that fry, suh," Maxwell adjured his guest. "Don't be backward. Ain't nobody squeamish at this table. Memnon, help Mr. Brownlee to the grits," which Memnon was in the act of doing. "An' make a long arm and reach some of that watermelon-rind pickles. Lucretia Borgia makes it right tasty-like."

"Don't crowd the gen'leman, Papa. Don't crowd him. Does seem like though that Mista Brownlee don't eat nothin' at all."

Before he could answer, Brownlee was compelled to wash down his mouthful of food with coffee that had hardly cooled in his saucer. "Wonderful meal, gen'lemen!" he gulped. "As good vittles as ever I et."

Lucretia Borgia insinuated herself into the room with the excuse of bringing hot coffee to refill the emptying cups. She had wanted to get a look at Brownlee ever since she learned of his arrival. "That Memnon, he don't step

fas' enough," she said by way of explanation. "He let ever'body run out of coffee. Triflin', that's whut."

"Sure is triflin'," assented the master. "Takes you jackin' him behind and me in front to git any work out'n him."

"Lucretia Borgia is the only nigger on the plantation worth killin'," Hammond added. "Does more work than any three on 'em."

The black eyes of Lucretia Borgia sparkled; her mouth grinned, displaying an expanse of powerful teeth; and her second chin bobbled in appreciation of the compliment. Approximately a quadroon, Lucretia Borgia, always addressed by her full name, was buxom and broad-beamed, rather than fat, as she appeared at a casual glance. She planted her large, bare feet on a broad base, swaying from side to side as she walked with a kind of majesty around the table. She was good natured with the good treatment she received and the good food left from her master's table. She chuckled her way into her master's graces and had her will of the whole plantation.

"She cook all these good vittles?" inquired Brownlee.

"She not only cook, but she boss the feedin' of the hands, overlooks the spinnin' and the loomin' in the quarters, and up to comin' three year ago brought a good sucker about every eighteen or twenty months. Shore a fas' breeder. She the dam of these triflin' twins," Maxwell piled praise upon praise. He knew how to inspire her to even greater efforts. "I guess she bred out, though she ain't too old. Jest brung babies too fast and clean bred out."

"Naw, suh; naw, suh, Masta," Lucretia Borgia burbled her tidings. "I knocked up again."

"No? Well bless my soul," said Maxwell, in amazement. "Have you got a silver dollar, Ham? Give it to Lucretia Borgia. How that come about?"

"I don't know, suh; but I is."

"Here's your dollar," said Ham. "And when that baby come there'll be another dollar, two dollars if it twins agin." Lucretia Borgia curtsied coyly as she took the coin from his hand and expressed an elaborate thanks.

To conceal her embarrassment, she diverted her attention to Meg. "You there, nigger, hol' that taper steady. You knows better than let it burn down at the sides, and stop your bobbin' it all aronnd until white folks cain't see what they's chewin'. I'm goin' to blister you, boy, blister you 'til you knows you've been blistered, soon as this supper's through."

Meg bit his lip to keep from crying, but he steadied the candle and stood still. Lucretia Borgia's promises were not idle. Alph also looked serious, for their mother did not whip them singly.

"So that Napoleon boy I give you had a nigger in him after all? A long time comin' out," commented Maxwell.

"I reckons I didn't git it from 'Poleon. That squirt no good. This baby is Memnon's, I figures. Masta Ham tole me to try Memnon agin, and I been pesterin' with him fer about a month."

"By golly, it might be twins, if it Memnon's. He was a twin his own

se'f and he is the twin-gittin'est nigger I ever had."

Memnon grinned to hear himself discussed so favorably. But his grin faded as his owner continued.

"I'd send the lazy son-of-a-bitch to market if he warn't such a sure stock boy. All he good fer is to pester the wenches. Cain't even keep a fire goin', and his toddies is always cold agin he gits 'em to you."

"I didn't know Memnon was running down again, Papa. Whyn't you tell me? Jawin' him don't do no good. I reckon I'd better call him out to the stable, when I gits time. A good patch of hide offn his rump with a good rubbing down with *pimentade* will spry him up," volunteered Ham.

"No, no, Masta. I be good. I work fas'. Don't need hidin'," Memnon begged.

"Stop puttin' your mouth into white folks' talk," his master warned him.

"Pimentade?" inquired Brownlee. "Whut's *pimentade?"*

Ham explained. "Hide tore offn a nigger, rub it over with *pimentade* and skin will grow right back without a mark. It sovereign fer skinning. You mix it out of salt, cayenne, and lemon juice. Course, it stings. The niggers dread the rubbin' more than the hidin', but it sho' straighten 'em out."

"Salt, cayenne pepper, and lemon?" Brownlee made a mental note. "Sounds convenient. Have to try it. I always uses turpentine."

"Turpentine is good, but *pimentade* better. Hurts worse and heals quicker."

"Sounds like, sounds like."

"Course, you got to take the hide off or the *pimentade* don't sting none. On young ones or wenches you don't want to skin down too much with the strap, you kin use a currying comb to loosen up the skin before you rub in the *pimentade* to make it sting."

"Some folks uses jest salt. Salt heals some, but it don't sting much," said the dealer.

Ham pushed back his chair and the party rose to return to the sitting room. Ham said, "Mayhap, and you don't feel yourself pushed in the mornin' to git away, I'll find the time to brush this boy down and you kin watch him squirm and wiggle and hear him holler when the *pimentade* goes on him. It's sovereign. Seems peculiar you never heared about it. The idy come from Domingo. Them Frenchies are smart, that way."

"Don't aim to git goin' too early. I'll kindly wait if you goin' to correct the boy anyway; wouldn't want you to take the trouble jest fer me to see. I sees lots of niggers larruped, but I always admires to see it. It's kind of comical-like—that is if it has to be done anyways. One kin always learn something."

Maxwell took a more moderate view. "We don't flog much on Falconhurst. Only two cases all last year that I recollect—both fer stealin'. But when we flogs we flogs good—we lays it on well."

"Only way," declared Brownlee.

"Only way, suh. Course, we don't use a snake to nip hunks out of the

meat and ruin a nigger. No, suh. I had me made a couple of paddles, a big one and a littler one fer saplin's and wenches, made out of sole leather with holes drilled through 'em. Hang 'em up, jest by the ankles, never by the toes 'lessen you twist 'em, with the legs spread wide as you kin spread 'em, and a rag stuffed in they mouth. Give that big paddle to a strong young buck and tell him to go to work. Why, you git the skin offn a nigger's rump in no time at all, and finish up with a good dosin' of this here *pimentade,* as Ham was tellin' you. Then go away and let the nigger hang and smart fer an hour or two, you got a good servant, a good servant, suh, from then on. Yes, suh, no nigger don't want a second dose like it."

"I've hearn of them holed paddles. Never saw none. They do say that a strong buck that knows how to use one kin make the blood squirt right through the holes. Yes, suh, it must be right purty to watch."

"No, not so purty—unless your taste run that way. Ham and me, we don't enjoy floggin's, and don't have more than we kin help. Course, goin' to keep niggers, you got to take the hide offn one, oncet in awhile. Especially house niggers. You're good to 'em, feeds 'em up on the kind of vittles you eats your own self, breeds 'em to your likeliest wenches, and they gits slack, gits triflin'. They don't mean no harm, but they's nothing more aggravatin' than a slack house nigger, nothin'."

"They takes advantage," interpolated Brownlee, who never had possessed a servant in his own house.

"Sure do, and has to have it corrected out of 'em. Take this Memnon boy, here, a good buck but lazy, lazy as they come. Spiled, spiled. Made a pet of. Oldest buck nigger on the place and never brushed but oncet."

"Guess it didn't do him no harm. Scar him up a little, mayhap, but if you don't aim to sell him nohow—"

"Not a mark on him. All healed over long ago. Ham was jist a baby then. Don't remember it, do you, Ham? His mamma hearn the little buck awailin' and come clear down to the stable and ast me to stop. White ladies right tender hearted that a-way."

"Women don't know nothin' about honery niggers."

"I don't reckon he merited the lickin' I give him. I hadn't ought to a done it. But I was mad. I learned that time never to flog a nigger when you mad. Wait till you cool some, and mayhap it won't be needful. But now with this nigger, he jest gits slothier and slothier; laziness jest keeps a-pilin' up. You hearn that cussin' I give him this evenin'. Didn't do no good. I reckon you right, Ham. Reckon you better pull a piece of hide offn him, sometime when you got an extra hour or two, no hurry about it. I kin spare him any time you likes."

"All right, Papa; I'll take care of him, tomorrow or next day. Lucretia Borgia kin mix toddy and fire up fer you while he's hanging up to dry, cain't you, Lucretia Borgia?"

"Sho' kin. Sho' kin." Lucretia Borgia enjoyed carnage.

"Maybe it might be a good idea to have Lucretia Borgia spank Mem ever' morning when she spanks the twins, that is after I gits through with him," declared Ham.

"Ever' morning?" inquired Brownlee.

"Yas, suh, ever' morning I softens up they bottoms some fer the devilishness they do yestiday. Cain't keep track of what the devilishness is, but I know they does it. Yas, suh. That way, with a little warmin' every day, they won't grow up and use up Masta Ham's time a-skinnin' 'em down every month or so. I aims that Alph and Meg to be spry niggers, fitten fer Masta to keep right in the house to wait on him good."

"I done told you, Lucretia Borgia, I don't know how many times, that I won't never whup them boys without'n your leave. Un'erstan'? I promise you," declared Hammond.

"Whup 'em whenever you feels like, Masta Ham," Lucretia Borgia answered. "But jest don' sell 'em. Don't sell 'em unlessen you gits a great big price fer 'em, please Masta."

"No, I won't never sell 'em either. Papa and me wants 'em fer ourselves. Don't we, Papa?"

"You done sold so many of my children right out from under me."

"Well, they was mine, wasn't they?" Maxwell bridled.

"Yas, suh, Masta. They's yours."

"And I got good homes for 'em, ever'one of 'em."

"Naw, suh, Masta. I ain't moanin' 'bout whure they went. I knows they gittin' good Christian raisin' up. But—"

"But whut? Lucretia Borgia, you outgrowin' your pants—tellin' me whut to do with my own little niggers. Remember I bought them children from you, paid you a silver dollar fer ever' damned one of 'em and two dollars fer them twins, and I'll do with 'em whut I damn please."

"Papa, Papa, don't git yourself all riled. It ain't good fer your rheumatiz," Hammond admonished.

Maxwell turned as quickly as his rheumatism would permit and stomped vexedly into the sitting room. Brownlee followed. Hammond remained in the dining room. He was disturbed at the turn the conversation had taken, thought the arousal of Lucretia Borgia's apprehensions about her beloved and badgered sons just a little gratuitous, debited his father's unnecessary testiness if not to age at least to rheumatic pain. It was unlike his father to bully the Negroes.

Hammond at length followed Lucretia Borgia across the open passageway and into the cheerful hot kitchen where the twins were gourmandizing on the left-overs from the main table and where he found Lucretia Borgia in unwonted tears. At his show of surprised compassion, she heaved from her bench, threw her heavy arms about his neck, and wept herself dry while Ham supported her vast bulk of hot flesh.

It required only a little compassion with the merest trace, which was

all Hammond possessed, of diplomacy to turn Lucretia Borgia's misery to the happiness which was her birthright. Her health, her indomitable vigor, and her status in the plantation hierarchy, first as a cook and then as a breeder, a breeder of amber twins, conspired together to inspire such gusto. That status had been depreciated, and with it went all the rest. Ham, without quite understanding his purpose, merely steadied Lucretia Borgia's tottering pedestal. He comforted her until the fountainhead of her tears was dry, after which he joked with her.

Ham's jokes lost nothing by their lewdness nor their lack of euphemism. They concerned Memnon's supplanting, or rather supplementing, Napoleon, the yellow youth whom Lucretia Borgia had chosen as her paramour, the comparison of their anatomies, and the circumstances of the woman's being pregnant.

The twins listened in silence, only half-comprehending at all why it should provoke such laughter from their mother and smiles from their master. They kept their eyes fixed on the single battered platter from which both ate with their fingers, lifting and rolling them now and again in the embarrassment of their failure to understand some of the terms their elders were using. There was no shame at what they understood, for they had listened to stark talk and overt bawdiness at the table of their masters, who would have thought it supererogatory to modify their conversations to protect so impersonal a commodity as the innocence of a couple of young slaves.

Ham stooped to banter with Lucretia Borgia, as he would not have done with any of his other servants, even with Memnon. He was a potentate and she was his vizier, almost his surrogate in the management of the other servants. She had already attained the highest status to which it was possible for her to aspire.

CHAPTER 3

HAMMOND'S motive, unsuspected by himself, in going to the kitchen was as much to get away from Brownlee's conversation as to succor Lucretia Borgia. He had endured about all of Brownlee that he was able, but his errand had exhausted itself and he was about to return to the sitting room when out of the black night there emerged an even blacker apparition in the person of the son of black Lucy.

"Miz Lucretia Borgia," he blurted, "my mammy say tell Masta Big Pearl sick. She awful sick."

Belshazzar addressed himself directly to the cook, as he had been directed, ignoring the master. Moreover, Belshazzar was frightened, frightened by the agonized cries of Big Pearl, by big buggers behind every bush, and by his temerity in entering the main house and bearding the majesty of Lucretia Borgia. He would have been terrified to violate his mother's instructions and speak directly to his young master.

"Whut ail Big Pearl?" Hammond demanded with an unintentional gruffness which paralyzed the child into dumbness. The boy swallowed and swallowed again. Unable to articulate, he could only stare in anticipation of whatever fate might be about to envelop him.

Hammond grasped Belshazzar's shoulder and repeated his question, "Whut ail Big Pearl?"

Big Pearl was tbe very gem of Falconhurst. Tawny as burnished copper, strong as a block and tackle, straight as a beam, and barely nubile, Big Pearl was as magnificent a pure Mandingo as had ever wielded a cotton hoe. She was elephantine equally in her proportions and in the grace with which she progressed. She did not walk or run or amble—Big Pearl merely progressed. She was beautiful only as a Gothic cathedral is beautiful. She was the plantation showpiece. Afraid of neither man nor devil, she was docile as a kitten, as biddable as putty. She delighted in being stripped and paraded and handled and bargained for, confident that the tremendous offers for her would be declined. She had never known an ill day in her life. To Hammond the heavens seemed to have fallen.

"Whut ail Big Pearl?" he asked a third time.

Belshazzar, frightened into dumbness was re-frightened into speech. "Me? I don't know, 'um. Big Pearl got a misery." He told all he knew.

Hammond, shuffling in his carpet slippers and limping on his stiffened knee, strode off across the blackness to Lucy's cabin. He walked so fast that Belshazzar had to break into an occasional run to keep up with him. The nearness of his master protected him from the dark.

Hammond heard the girl's groans, pierced at intervals by a wailing scream. He pushed open the cabin door. All was in confusion. Children cowered in fright against the walls in the background. Flames roared in the fireplace.

Lucy bent, solicitous but in helpless despair, above the bed where Big Pearl threshed in her agony, making the cold night hideous with the sounds that issued from the innermost depths of her being.

Hammond was moved to compassion by the girl's distress. He didn't know what to do for her. He approached the bed, pushed the towering Lucy aside and, sitting down beside the girl, took her hand in his. "Big Pearl, whut's the matter? Whut ail you?"

"I got a misery, Masta Ham, I got a misery in my belly, Masta—but it better now." The moaning ceased and Big Pearl lay calm. "It's better now," she repeated weakly.

"That wench reckon acause she a good cook an' a good breeder, she own the plantation," Maxwell declared petulantly to Brownlee. "She think Ham and me her servants and not her ourn. Hammond is, seem like. He ain't got no gizzard whure them servants is concerned. Too soft hearted to drive niggers, that's a fac'. She'll fin' out, that Lucretia Borgia, who has the han'le of the snake around these parts," he muttered and threatened impotently. "She'll fin'."

"Won't never do to let a nigger git the upper hand," his guest agreed, seating himself before the fire.

"I good to niggers, feed 'em all they kin swallow, shelter and clothe 'em, never work 'em hard enough to stop them growin', keep 'em happy, and let 'em alone," Maxwell expounded his moderation. "But," he added, "a nigger is a nigger and he has got to be kept a nigger." He summoned Memnon and commanded corn which was forthcoming more rapidly than Memnon had ever fetched a drink before. And it was hot—perfect.

"Does you have any religion fo' yo' niggers?" Brownlee inquired idly.

"Hell, no!" replied Maxwell, paring his tobacco. "The more religion a nigger gits the honerier he is, and the harder to drive."

"Don't worry none about they immortal souls? Eh?"

"I don't calc'late they has got no immortal souls. Mayhap, some of the yeller ones. Leastwise, I don't want none of them in heaven with me. Let a nigger git to heaven and have a few privileges, he'll git to thinkin he's as good as white folks." There was nothing facetious in Maxwell's tone.

"Some thinks that give 'em some religion to think about, they's quieter and more contented like; they's satisfied to kinder settle down in this life so that they kin raise hell when they gits to heaven."

"Heaven too fur away fer young niggers. They don't figger that fur ahead. And mine is mostly young. I sell 'em off before they're past breedin' age, and so long as a nigger kin breed, he don't think nothin' about goin' to heaven."

"You could spare me some more of 'em, seems like. I'm still ready to buy. Don't relish goin' home empty handed."

"Not yet, not yet. Every nigger I got is soun' and perfec' and well, now

that you traded fer them two. But the young bucks all got some growin' in 'em yet."

Maxwell drained his glass and called for another and Brownlee again asked for straight corn. He was beginning to need it.

When Memnon brought the drinks, his master remarked, "Whyn't Masta Hammond say good night? Mayhap provoked about whut I say to Lucretia Borgia."

"No, suh, Masta. Masta Ham ain't go to bed. He out with Big Pearl."

"I'm glad he gittin' some sense about that. But whyn't he fetch her into the house? Afraid I'll cod him about her, I reckon."

"Naw, suh, Masta," Memnon contradicted with a show of temerity. "Masta Ham ain't pesterin' around Big Pearl. Big Pearl sick."

"Rubbish," Maxwell opined. "Big Pearl ain't sick; she ain't ever been sick."

"Big Pearl sick," Memnon persisted. "Carryin' on somethin' turrible. Lucy sent to tell Masta Hammon'. He out to Lucy's cabin now. Big Pearl's hollerin' stopped though. I reckon she better."

Maxwell was less concerned with the big wench's illness than with the failure of his son to bid him good night before he should go to bed. To be sure, Maxwell was loath that anything amiss should occur to so magnificent and valuable a wench, and was fearful of some disease that might spread through the overcrowded plantation. But he was even more apprehensive about the offense he might have given Hammond. He was cognizant of his utter and absolute and complete dependence upon his son not only for the management of the plantation, the driving of the Negroes, the making of the cotton crop, but for the filial companionship and love, sentiments which to Maxwell, despite all his practicality, were needs greater than food itself. He knew how rare were such relationships as his with his son, how illogical and even unfair to ask of a boy. What had he to offer youth? He was in constant terror of Hammond's defection.

The creaking of a stair tread conjured up for the father the concept of Hammond's failure to kiss him good night. "Who that on the stairs?" he demanded of Memnon. "That him, come in and goin' up?"

"Naw, suh, Masta. It only Dite goin' up to Masta Hammon's room to wait fer him."

"Strike a good blazin' fire up there. Masta Hammond'll be cold all through, agin he come in."

"Already struck, and room all warm fer Masta Hammon'," said Memnon self-righteously. The chastisement promised him for tomorrow had already stimulated Memnon to thoughtfulness and alacrity.

"You says your niggers never run. Ever'body I knows has trouble keepin' they niggers from runnin'. How you do it? How come yourn never runs?" asked Brownlee, gulping his whiskey.

Maxwell felt of his hot glass and renewed his chew of tobacco. "Good

feed and light work, I reckon. Nowhures to run to better'n Falconhurst, so they all stays."

Hammond at length returned to the house and, sinking into a chair, ordered Memnon to fetch him a toddy. His apparent fatigue and anxiety caused his father to voice his solicitude.

"I's all right," Hammond replied, not very convincingly.

"How Big Pearl? Whut ails her?" Maxwell inquired impatiently.

"Big Pearl better now, I reckon. Guess it weren't more than the belly-ache. Worst over, time I got there," the youth explained. "I poured her out a big dose of castor oil and give her a little laudanum. Reckoned that the bes' thing."

"Sure is," Maxwell affirmed.

"Then I called Lancelot and had him tote Big Pearl down to the old pest house on his back. Big as that boy is, all he could do to tote that young wench. Don't think it's nothin' but too much hog meat from that fresh killin', but don't want to take a chance on no catchin' epizootic with a plantation full of young niggers."

"You done right, Ham. You done jest right. Got gumption, you has," Maxwell said approvingly. "I ain't heard of nothing goin' around, but the pox or the vomit would clean us right out. You doue jest right."

"Good as I could. Had Lancelot make up a big fire in the pest house, and left him a-settin' by it to watch her. If Big Pearl ain't better by morning, I'll put a boy on a mule and have him ride to the veterinary in Benson."

" 'Tain't safe, 'tain't safe, I'm afeared, to leave that Lancelot boy with that wench all night. He mighty full blooded and vig'ous. We doesn't want no accidents of that kind with that choice wench."

"I warned him I'd hide him if he pestered her," said Hammond.

"Virgin yet, ain't she?"

"I reckon so. I ain't felt to see since last pickin' time. Lucy pretty moral and she goin' watch her."

"I don't know whut's the matter with you, Ham, lettin' a nice smooth wench like Big Pearl go virgin so long—goin' on fifteen years."

"Kinda shirkin' your duty, ain't you, son?" interposed Brownlee intimately.

"They all expects some attention from they masta. The first time anyway. I'm all stove up with this consarned rheumatiz and ain't no good no more," Maxwell complained.

"But I done tol' you at least fifty times," Hammond answered his father, "I cain't stan' the musk of a real nigger. The yaller ones is bad enough."

"When I was your age, there weren't no fourteen-year-old virgins around Falconhurst, you kin lay to that. Black or yaller, musky or sweet-smellin', if I didn't git 'em, your Uncle Dick did. Dick was younger than me and puny. Our pappy strapped me more than once fer pesterin' some wench he had set aside a-savin' her fer Dick," reminisced Maxwell. "Whut, Mista Brownlee?

Did a little nigger musk bother you when you was a boy?"

"None, none at all; but my pappy didn't own no niggers of his own. He was an overseer and the yaller wenches was all set aside fer the owner and his boys. I didn't have a chance at none but the black ones, and they was, fer a fac', musky. I had to take whut I could git, and they wasn't virgins, hardly ever, 'lessen they was deformed or somethin'," Brownlee was candid.

"Yaller skins was scarcer then than now. Most of the niggers was bozal brutes, or leastwise not more than first crosses, back in them times. Go into the quarters and the musk would near knock you down," Maxwell explained.

"Yes, suh. I've heared old sailors say that you could scent a slaver five miles, down the wind in the Middle Passage," said Brownlee.

"Bucks are the worst," declared Ham.

"Sure are. Because they don't wash as much as the wenches, I reckon. Course, mere washin' of 'em don't kill the musk, but it helps some."

"Ain't nothin' stink worse than a dirty nigger. We makes ourn go down to the river and wash all over with soap most ever' Saturday—of course in the summer time, that is," Hammond explained. "House servants washes in a tub the year round, winter and summer."

"That's the reason your niggers don' stink—much. Don' smell hardly no musk at all in your house. Not like some owners that don't never wash their servants at all," Brownlee conveyed his compliment. "Course, there's one way to kill musk ever' whit—good deal of trouble, but it kin be done."

"Whut way?" inquired Hammond interestedly. "Rub 'em with some essence? That jest puts one stink on another and makes 'em worse."

"No; I mean soak 'em good, about five minutes, in 'manganate of potash water, not too strong, jest kind of red."

"Whut's that?" asked Maxwell.

"Why, that's that coarse-powder-like stuff in that dusty bottle out in the medicine shelf. Never knew whut it was fer or whut to do with it. Come in one of throwin' it away," said Hammond.

"That's whut it's fer," declared Brownlee. "Everybody in New Orleans use it on they house niggers. A 'manganated wench will keep absolutely sweet two whole days; a buck begins to shed his musk agin after 'bout a day. Got to soak a buck ever' day to keep him right sweet. I reckoned everybody knowed about that."

"Shore never heared on it," Maxwell said. "That, out on the shelf, was mayhap some of Sophy's doin's. She was powerful clean. Jest couldn't stand a musky nigger."

"We'll have to try it," Hammond resolved. "How much do you use?"

"Jest enough to make the water red—not purple, and soak the nigger in it, head and all, all but his nose, about a good five minutes. One tub of 'manganate is enough fer a dozen or more niggers—no call to was'e it. But never don't let it set to use over and over. It loses its stren'th in time."

"Shore gotten to try it," Maxwell said. "I don't hold much with these

new fangled idees. But that cain't do no harm. Think me to try it tomorrow, Ham."

"Papa sure don't believe in new fangled stuff," complained Ham. "Papa don't want I should even go fer that new way of plowin' across the gullies instead of alongside 'em, that Mista Tom Jefferson up in Virginia wrote about. But I'm goin' to do it, come plow time, anyhow."

"Too much trouble," explained Maxwell. "The dirt of Falconhurst is all petered out a'ready. Let it dreen. Cain't grow a full crop of cotton on it, Mista Tom Jefferson or no Mista Tom Jefferson. All this land is now good fer is raisin' niggers. Cotton is jest somethin' to keep 'em kinda busy, so they won't set around and git idees."

"Mista Tom Jefferson a mighty smart man, and I aims to foller his leadin'," persisted Ham. "He says plowin' agin the grain of the dreenin' keeps the top dirt from washin' down the Tombigbee and builds up the growin' matter in the land."

"Too late, too late. Falconhurst is done fer cotton. If I had a-started earlier, when Mista Tom first talked about it, things might have been different. But it's a lot of trouble, and too late anyway. Falconhurst does all right as is. Let good enough alone. I'm not sayin' Tom Jefferson weren't smart. I only says it too late."

"Don't git riled up so, Papa. It ain't good fer your rheumatiz."

"Damn my rheumatiz! Don't do this and don't do that. It gits worser, whatever I do or quit doin'. Toddies do more fer it than anythin', seems like. But tonight's the worst it's ever been."

Ham shook his head in despair. "I only wishes you could git one of them nekid dogs the Mexicans got. They do say that sleepin' with your feet agin one of them dogs dreens the rheumatiz right out of a man and into the dog."

"I've hearn about 'em, but I never seen one. I doubt that there really is sich a thing as a nekid dog."

"They is. They have 'em," Brownlee declared.

"Who has 'em? Whure kin I git one?" Maxwell was willing to try anything. "Though Doc Nixon says they ain't no good, won't work."

"They good all right," said Brownlee. "My own self, I ain't never seen one, but they have 'em—not a hair on 'em."

"Must be right comical," conjectured Maxwell.

"Course, any dog shaved down so that the feet kin git right agin its skin, is jest as good—or a nigger. A nigger will dreen off the rheumatiz through the feet jest as good as any nekid dog."

"Do you reckon so?"

"Shore do," Brownlee was confident. "Why, I knew a man name of Bronson over in Natchez that tried it. So cripped up he couldn't hardly walk. He tried sleepin' with his feet agin, tight agin, the belly of a nigger and in no time at all, a few weeks at most, Bronson was a-walkin' and a-straddlin' his horse as good as ever. The old rheumatiz jest dreened right out'n him

into the nigger. Nigger all cripped in no time, jest like Bronson was before."

"Might be worth tryin'," said Ham.

"Might be," repeated Maxwell hopefully. "Don't know why we never hearn about it."

"Course, I didn't see the cripped nigger, myself; but Bronson sartainly got well and said the nigger had the rheumatiz—was lookin' around fer somethin' to cure him up."

"Get me a nigger, Hammond; I'll begin this very night. Have him washed up good. A buck is better than a wench—a wench is sorta disturbin' when you got the rheumatiz and cain't do nothin'."

"We'll use one of the twins, and I'll give Lucretia Borgia some of that black powder to put in the wash water to kill the muskiness."

"Sort of hate to ruin one of them twins with rheumatiz," speculated Maxwell.

"We kin dreen it right out of him into some other nigger if he gits too bad. He's right here in the house and handy," Hammond said, rising to go to arouse Lucretia Borgia to give her instructions about the preparation of her son for his master's use.

"Course, you got to have the nigger sort of curl up around your feet, and you got to press hard and kindly force the rheumatiz right out'n the soles," Brownlee counseled expertly.

Maxwell rubbed his knees and massaged one hand with the other. The pain subsided from time to time, but it never entirely left his joints. He had become so inured to its presence that when it was least he was unaware of it, until a sudden pang shot through the various parts of his body which forced him to restrain himself to keep from crying out. "The worse of it is Hammond," he lamented. "He's young—too young to tote the whole plantation on his shoulders. I got no mind to complain about the way he does—does right good; but at eighteen I was out and around, sowin' my oats, and up to all kinds of devilment."

"A smart, study boy like him. It won't hurt him none to be nailed down for awhile," Brownlee hazarded. "I never got out to raise no hell. It never hurt me."

"He never even got no schoolin' to speak of. His mamma learned him to read a little and I tried to after she died. She could read real good, better'n I kin. Then I sent him to the Institute over at Jackson fer a term three or four years ago, but couldn't stand havin' him away—wouldn't let him go back. Always afraid somethin' would happen to him—after that gelding pony, I was fool enough to put him on when he was little, threw him off and stiffened his knee. You cain't never trust a gelding; give me a whole horse or none. Schoolin' is a great thing fer a boy. He needs it—more and more as time goes on, more than in my day."

"Don't know; don't know. Sometimes schoolin' ruints a boy—makes 'em big headed," Brownlee opined. "Jest cain't stand a big head. I didn't never

have no edication and didn't never need none. Course, I had got to learn to cipher a little, and am right good at it now. But I never was ruint by book learnin'."

Maxwell was still doubtful about the havoc wrought by education. "Guess Ham got enough to git along with, but I wish't he had more of it. I wish't I hadn't been so hoggish fer him, a-holdin' of him back."

"It sense that counts—not learnin'," Brownlee consoled. "And Hammond got sense."

"I helt him back that a-way, and I'm still a-holdin' him back. Besides the plantation and two hundred niggers, he's got me and my rheumatiz on his shoulders. Young as he is, I wonder if he wouldn't be better off if I was dead. Of course, if my pains don't better, I won't last long, and I'd like to see him married off before I die—course to some nice, well-bred young lady—I want to see it. I want to see 'em breed another boy to take over Falconhurst when Ham gits the rheumatiz or whatever and to carry it along through the generations. Course, Falconhurst is played out fer cotton; but who needs cotton with niggers goin' up and up?"

" 'Lessen them abolitionists at the North sets all the niggers free," Brownlee interposed, at once derisive and skeptical.

"Triflin' loafers, interferin' in other folks' business. Slavery was ordained by God, by God, and there ain't nothin' they kin do about it except talk and stir up trouble between slavery territory and free territory, between South and North. Cain't they understand that you got to have niggers to grow cotton, and you got to grow cotton to feed them Northern spindles? They tryin' to 'bolish they own jobs and they own profits?" Maxwell rose to his feet in the excitement of his own eloquence.

"They dangerous, howsumever," said Brownlee. "Take them Quakers, and take that Garrison and that newspaper he started to print last year, that *Liberator,* as he calls it. Seen any o' them papers?"

"Don't want to see none. To read about 'em in *The New Orleans Advertiser* turns me sick. Better not nobody fetch one of them *Liberators* to Falconhurst; they ain't decent, ain't fitten to wipe a nigger with."

"Better not let the niggers see 'em, anyway. Puts idees in they heads," Brownlee warned.

"My niggers cain't read. Best law ever passed, that law agin learnin' niggers to read."

"Some does it even agin the law," Brownlee said.

"An' they liable to have a risin' to fight, too. No nigger readin', no nigger risin'. Why that Garrison hadn't printed that *Liberator* of his six months when that nigger risin' up in Virginia happened last year. Wonder they never could ketch that Nat Turner nigger."

"They ketched him. Didn't you know? They ketched him and hung him along about harvest time."

"Hung him?" Maxwell was incredulous.

"Hung him."

"Jest hung him? Didn't burn him or nothin' after killin' all them white folks? Had ought to of burned him. Ought to of made a sample of him."

"Had ought to have burned that Garrison at the same post and to stoked the fire with *Liberators,*" Brownlee agreed. "Garrison jest set the nigger on.—Strange you never hearn about it."

"I missed some *New Orleans Advertisers* around pickin' time. Ham didn't have no time to ride to Benson and the postmaster throwed 'em out. Reckoned we didn't want 'em."

"All up and down the Seaboard, folks are still a-talkin' about Nat Turner. They skeared of more risin's. All through Virginia and the Carolinas, and 'specially Georgia."

"They don't know nothin' about how to treat niggers. Treat 'em right, feed 'em, don' overwork 'em, and they don't uprise. Owners too greedy to git work out'n 'em. A nigger responds to good treatment better'n a dog. I don' have no trouble with mine, and Ham don't."

Hammond entered from the dining room, guiding with hand on shoulder one of the Borgia's twins. The boy had been roused from bed, bathed and soaked in a potassium permanganate solution, despite which he still was not fully awake. He was entirely naked and seemed unconcerned about the purpose of his arousal or the fate in store for him. He had confidence in Hammond and feared no abuse.

"Here's your Mexican dog," Ham greeted his father. "Used that red stuff on him and there ain't a trace of musk about him, smell like'n as if he was white."

"Come here, boy. Set and drink your toddy, Ham, ere it git cold," Maxwell sniffed at various parts of the boy and declared himself satisfied. "Must be strong medicine that kill nigger-stink like that. Smell of him, Mr. Brownlee," and he pushed the child toward the trader's chair.

Brownlee in his turn sniffed and continued to sniff the boy all over, handling and embracing and patting him and clinging onto him, as if he doubted the efficacy of his own prescription. Brownlee too, at last, was convinced, but reluctant to surrender the young Negro servant. The Maxwells were insensible to Brownlee's dalliance with the child, until, in the belief that the boy was lingering for attention and failing to note that the trader was grasping him, Hammond commanded the boy to be seated.

The chairs about the fireside were occupied and the boy retreated to one at the rear of the room and gingerly propped himself into it, unsure of what was expected of him.

"Meg, whure your manners? You knows better than set in a chair," Hammond said sternly.

The boy immediately found his feet. "I ain't Meg; I Alph."

"You Meg if'n I call you Meg. You knows who I means. You a nigger, and niggers sets on the floor in white folks' houses."

The repentant child slipped to the floor. He opened his mouth to excuse himself with the plea that he had never been in that room before and was unaware of the amenities, then thought better of such a policy in the state of his younger master's mood and bit his tongue.

Hammond saw that the child intended no disrespect and changed his tone. "Come over here and set whure it wa'm," he half commanded, half invited, "there at one side of the hearth."

The boy complied, squatting toad-fashion between his legs, comfortable and serene. He made an effort to listen to the conversation of the whites but couldn't keep his eyes open. What he heard was neither interesting nor intelligible to him. He wondered what his masters drank that smelled so good. At length he toppled over upon his side, curled up, and slept warmly. The Maxwells ignored his presence, but his rounded contours were caressed by lecherous glances from the small, washed-out, porcine and bloodshot eyes of Brownlee.

"The boy's asleep," he remarked.

"Yes. One more toddy, and we'll all retire to bed," said Maxwell. "I crave to git me into bed with my feet agin his belly; crave to try it," whereupon he summoned Mem.

Memnon had been in and out of the sitting room all the evening, renewing the fire, serving drinks, replacing candles. Unobtrusive and alert, he forgot nothing. He was bent upon proving that the whipping promised him for tomorrow was supererogatory. His imagination already felt the smart of his buttocks, and he pictured the contempt that the other Negroes would feel for him, the derogation of his status which he had lorded before his black kind. His disgrace would be as poignant as the impact of the paddle.

"You powder that betel nut I tol' you to?" demanded Maxwell.

"Yas, suh, Masta; yas, suh, sure did," Mem answered, and made a mental note that it must be done before he went to sleep. To admit forgetting the chore would have added one more item to his indictment.

"Reckon I ought to go down to the pest house to see how Big Pearl come on afore I goes to retire?" Hammond asked his father.

"Let Big Pearl be. You weary, Ham. Night's cole outdoors. Git yourself some sleep, and stop your frettin' about all them niggers. You ain't they mamma. You ain't called to coddle and nurse 'em, the way you doin'. They all right. Let 'em alone."

"Howsumever, I 'sponsible fer 'em. I'm right fond of our niggers, and right proud of 'em. Every one of 'em sound as a hickory. And that Big Pearl—I'd sure grieve to lose her."

"Course, a good nigger is a right smart loss, these times and these prices. But why this here Pearl more than some othern?"

"Whyn't you show Big Pearl to Mista Brownlee, Papa?"

"First place, she ain't fer sale. Second place, she make other niggers look

puny. Third place, it rainin' and I didn't want to shuck her down out in that rain and wind."

"Youen's show nigger, eh?"

"Mandingo, pure Mandingo," Maxwell explained. "Don't find many Mandingos pure no more. All crossed up and bred out with Angolas and Wydahs and other tribes, even with white blood."

"I likes 'em black," Brownlee declared.

"Me? I likes 'em lusty, whutever they color. Course, it all right fer white men to pester black wenches—a protection to white womanhood, I always says. But everybody wantin' yaller niggers; puny, frail, weak, white owners spends all they sap a-tryin' to git light-colored babies, that ain't fitten to grow into strong cotton hands. They all dreams of gittin' fancy yaller wenches that they kin sell young fer a monst'ous price. If they had a lookin' glass they know they couldn't sire nothin' but ugly, knotty runts. Course, I ain't meaning such owners as Ham, here, sturdy, and purty an' vig'ous, but Ham ain't runnin' through the cabins a-coverin' all the wenches a-tryin' fer yeller offspring. No, suh."

The personal aspect of his father's diversion of the conversation Hammond found embarrassing. He sought to turn it back into its channel. "You sayin' about Mandingos, Papa," he began.

"So I was, so I was. I was talkin' about Big Pearl. I'll come back to that," said Maxwell, refusing the interruption. "Ham ain't got but two or three babies all told—but they all turned out little bucks. They fancy, light-yallers, all right, but all bucks. His oldest one—comin' on four, now—is as healthy and purty and straight a saplin' as ever I see. Course, it gits extrie feed and everythin', eggs and clabber an' all."

"Ham look like he be a right vigorous stud," said Brownlee.

"Didn't look fer that first one to amount to nothin' at all with Hammond jest fourteen years old when he got it. Dropped the day after his fifteenth birthday. Proudest boy ever was; thought he was a man fer shore."

"You purty mad, I reckon, when you found out about him pesterin' your wenches at that age," said Brownlee. "Course, I know they all do it, but nothin' come of it."

"Wasn't my wench. She was his'n. One his mamma left him. She begin a-waitin' on him when he was about eleven or twelve—when he shed his nurse-mammy."

"Wonder he wasn't a-ruint."

"Ruther have a boy a-pesterin' a smart, little clean wench than have him a-drivin' hisself crazy a-hankerin' to. I'd been stronger—and smarter too—if my old man had a-give me a wench of my own before I was sixteen, a-goin' on seventeen."

"Seventeen? I was nineteen, and even then she wasn't mine or my pappy's. She belonged to the man my pappy was overseein' fer, a ugly sambo, I reckon, leastwise lookin' back I think she was part Choctaw. Course, I sneaked some

before that," conceded Brownlee. "Out in the patches when the hands was noonin', whenever I could shun my paw."

Maxwell showed little interest in the trader's youth. Brownlee was a poor recommendation for boyhood continence. "In them days pappies didn't know how hankerin' fer a wench could stunt a boy and drive him lunatic." The intimation was that Brownlee's shortcomings were chargeable to his father's negligence. "Pro'bly the reason young men at the North are so sapless and witless—nothin' but white gals to pester with when they boys."

The trader was more interested in the goblet of corn whiskey which Agamemnon was bringing than in Maxwell's comments. Mem's gait was unsteady, his eyes emitted a glassy glint. His hand trembled on the tray as he handed the drinks about, although he refrained from spilling them.

"Come here, you black scoun'rel. Kneel down here and let me smell you," Maxwell commanded.

Memnon found refuge in tears. "I didn't drink none. I didn't do it, Masta, suh. I didn't do it. I on'y jest taste to see was it hot. On'y jest taste, suh."

"Hammond, smell that boy's breath."

Memnon knelt by Maxwell, afterward he crawled on his knees toward Hammond, who sniffed him but casually.

"That mean jest twenty-five more squshings with that paddle tomorrow." Hammond addressed his father, ignoring the Negro. "And a big drench of ipecac tonight last thing. That'll puke that corn out'n him."

"No, Masta, suh, no," the darkie begged *sotto voce,* not daring to speak out lest he aggravate the sentence, and yet unable to keep silent. "I jest tasted." Memnon knew that in so factual and objective a mood Hammond was relentless; if his master had reviled and threatened him, he might have softened him with his repentance. Hammond did not even deign to address him. His resolution was not even tempered by his anger.

When Memnon saw that Hammond was unmoved by pity, he rose to his feet and slunk from the room, but he was entirely sobered. The whiskey he had drunk to smother his anticipations of the morrow's chastisement had lost its lethe. All the agility and promptitude he had displayed throughout the evening to avert the disaster had been canceled out. The ipecac was a punishment that exactly fitted the crime. The very thought of it caused him to retch in anticipation. He slipped out of the house and vomited. He knew that the powerful emetic would turn him wrong side out and he had no illusions about the size of the dose that would be poured out for him. When he returned to the house from his excursion out into the wind-filled darkness, the yellow of Mem's face had taken on a greenish hue. He was sick at his stomach and sick at heart.

"As I was a-sayin' about them Mandingos," Maxwell resumed his monologue, oblivious of the interruption, "they right satisfyin'—powerful, biddable, healthy. Cain't un'erstand this Big Pearl a-fallin' sick."

"How you know she pure Mandingo?" Brownlee inquired.

"Look at her! Look at her! Don't have more than to look at her," answered her owner. "But I knows her history—all about her, too.—Ol' Colonel Wilson of Coign Plantation, up the road a-piece, about fifty or sixty miles, needed some han's and rid to Charleston to buy a passel of bozals. Course, it was back in the time when the Colonel was young and could ride, the days before Mista Tom Jefferson stopped 'em from bringin' in brutes. Everything was law-abidin'."

Hammond had heard the story before, and diverted himself by tickling Alpha's feet and watching his reflexes. Brownlee was mildly interested in Maxwell's tale, and even more in Hammond's play with the young boy.

"Colonel Wilson foun' 'em unloadin' a whole cargo of prime Mandingos, two or three hunerd big, docile, upstandin' brutes, and he picked himself out four or five good ones. Colonel Wilson know a good nigger. They never cost much then—five, six or seven hunerd apiece. Two of 'em, a big buck and a stout wench, was about the purtiest things I ever see. That wench must have been nineteen hands, or near it, and the buck even taller; and they wasn't jest tall, but they was thick, not fat but hard, hard as mahogany.

"Course, Colonel Wilson bred the two of 'em together and got a wench child—a big sturdy wench over sixteen pounds the day she was dropped; but 'bout that time the vomit broke out at Coign and the old wench died and all the other Mandingos, all except the big buck and the baby."

"Bad luck," said Brownlee.

"Turrible, turrible. But the baby growed; and when she big an' ready to breed, Colonel Wilson didn't have no Mandingo 'ceptin' her pappy to breed her to, and he was bounden to keep his Mandingo blood pure. So what he do? He put the wench right back to her pappy."

"Didn't he know no better than that?" Brownlee asked. "Why, that awful; that incest; that goin' agin the Bible. I knowed a white man up in Tennessee oncet that pestered his own nigger daughter and had a wench child, that was jest a little puny, that cried all the time, never did grow none, and was weak minded. Jest lay and slobbered. About three years old, the old man, seein' that it wasn't never goin' be worth nothin', took pity and knocked it in the head. Your Colonel Wilson ought to know better'n that."

"Well, he didn't. The wench brought him the biggest, most vigorest young saplin' you ever see. Most grown now, but the Colonel won't market him. Goin' to keep him fer seed."

"I swan!" said Brownlee.

"Seein' as how it worked so good the first time, Colonel Wilson put the young wench right back to her pappy agin, and this time got a wench baby, Big Pearl. I bought her and Lucy—that her mammy—offen the Colonel while Big Pearl was a-suckin' yet.

"That's how I knows she is pure Mandingo. Her and Lucy and Colonel Wilson's two—the old buck and the young one—are the only simon purentee Mandingos I knows about anywhures. Beautiful niggers, all on 'em."

"Real dangerous, I call it," said Brownlee. "I wouldn't risk it. Whut you goin' to do with your wench? No more Mandingos to mate her up with."

"When Hammond gits the time, I aims to have him ride to Coign Plantation and plead with Colonel Wilson to borrow the old bozal buck to us fer a month or two. I aims to breed Big Pearl right back once more to her pappy, and her grandpappy. The buck is sixty or sixty-five years, maybe seventy, come now; but I reckon he got sap in him yet."

"Don't risk it, Mista Maxwell, suh. Don't risk it. That awful."

Brownlee's horror only confirmed Maxwell in his determination. "Works fine in horses and cows and hogs and dogs and sich. I don't see why it won't work with niggers. Course, you got to have fine stock; no good with puny stock."

"You breedin' in too fur, Mr. Maxwell. Thought you knowed more'n that about niggers."

"Ham thinks it all right. Don't you, Ham? If he gives the nod to it, we goin' to try it."

Hammond had stopped playing with the sleeping child. He was tired, resting, hardly listening. "Papa, you been talkin' that plan fer three years. Thought your mind was set, jest waitin' fer me to go to Coign to fetch the buck. I'll find the time in a few days. Don't reckon there's nothin' to lose except Big Pearl's time, if the foal should turn out puny or something."

The Seth Thomas which ticked and ticked on the mantelpiece coughed and clanged eight rapid strokes of its bell, as if its duty were unpleasant and it wished to get it over with as quickly as possible.

"That danged clock," observed Maxwell. "Keeps right time—about; but it's an hour slow in its chiming. Kin fix it—ever git time."

Hammond stretched. "Reckon it time to go up. 'Bout nine, ain't it Papa?" Merely to go to bed was somehow indelicate.

"Quarter after—about. Clock's slow, too. Wait till he mix me a toddy and you kin have Memnon. Next he kin take care of Mista Brownlee, and then me."

Memnon brought the drinks for Maxwell and Brownlee as ordered.

His presence reminded Maxwell of his misdemeanor. He cautioned Hammond, "You won't ferget that ipecac, Son?"

"No, Papa. I mix it, I git npstairs."

Memnon paled at the thought. "I ain't needin' no medicine now. I's puked, I's puked good a'ready. I's puked that corn, ever' bit of it."

"You's goin' to puke and puke and puke some more. You's goin' to puke all night, goin' to puke up all your innards with that dose I'm plannin' to pour into you," Hammond threatened. "And you better go to sleep with them bucks in the stable, 'stead of in the hall by my door. Don't want you pukin' on the carpet, and don't want to listen to you gittin' up and goin' out and comin' in. You goin' to be one pukin' nigger, you kin lay to that."

"Cain't cure a nigger from drinkin' corn, 'lessen you locks it up away

from him," Brownlee observed.

"I'll cure this one; last thing I do—cure him or kill him. When I gits through pukin' him tonight and hidin' him tomorrow, corn will make him sick ever' time he mix Papa a toddy."

Memnon was silent. There was no rebuttal to fate itself. Hammond yawned and rose, reluctant to leave the warm fireside to go into the cold hall. He planted a perfunctory kiss upon his father's cheek, bade Brownlee a polite good night and pleasant dreams, and, noting the inviting target of Alpha's protruding rump, reached down and gave it a resounding smack. Alpha's muscles were constantly bruised from Lucretia Borgia's daily spankings, and the blow, intended only as a caress, was painful. The boy, only half aroused from sleep, cried out, reached around and rubbed his buttock and slept again. "Don't fergit your footwarmer; it's a cold night, Papa," Ham joked.

"Dite gone up a'ready?" Hammond inquired of Memnon.

"Dite go up early," Memnon replied.

"Come 'long, then," said Hammond and limped out, followed by the apprehensive Negro.

Maxwell sensed with dismay the uneven steps upon the stairs, the irregular ambulation down the upstairs hall of his crippled son. He censured himself again for having entrusted his heir to the uncertain temperament of a gelding.

"Who that?" Brownlee inquired.

Maxwell's mind was upon the accident, long passed. "Whut you mean, suh?"

"Who that? That Dite?"

"Oh, that. That Hammond's bed wench."

"Purty, I reckon," the trader voiced his imagination.

"Right likely. Mustee, I guess."

"Light, eh? And young?"

"Fourteen, mayhaps fifteen now. Why?"

"I was jest a-thinkin', jest a-thinkin' whut a fine lot of niggers you all got. Got 'em all over the place, and won't sell none."

CHAPTER 4

WHEN Ham entered his bedroom his concubine rose to welcome him. She had taken off her clothes and stood covered only with a quilt wrapped around her and hanging from her shoulders. "You late, suh," she said casually.

"Yes, a little. Big Pearl sick. Whyn't you lay down?"

"Waitin' to know an' if you wants me in the bed or on a pallet."

"On the floor I reckon. I tired tonight," Hammond said as he sank into a chair before the fire and surrendered to Mem's ministrations. Then he reconsidered, "No; git into bed and warm them sheets up until I strips and after that you kin take to your pallet."

Aphrodite dropped her quilt and stood naked as she turned down the covers, adjusted the bolster and plumped herself upon the feather bed. Mem stripped Hammond of his clothes, hoping his master had forgotten the ipecac. As Ham stood before the fire turning himself and scratching his parts, Aphrodite lay looking at him with servile affection.

Hammond's body, barring some areas on his back and around his belly, was enveloped in blond hair, hardly heavier than down, but of considerable length. As he stood between Dite and the fire, turning as if on a slow spit, he appeared as if wearing some golden fleece, like Zeus, if Dite had known the legend, coming to Danae in an aureate shower. Standing, the stiffness of his knee was not apparent. His shoulders were not broad, but they were hard and strong and, clothed with hair, seemed larger than they really were. His body was more than normally long and his legs somewhat short. Long hours in the saddle had developed his thighs, which bulged and rippled as he changed his position in the firelight.

"Fetch me a big gourd, that big, yeller bottle agin the wall on the shelf, and a jug of hot water. We goin' to have some fun."

Mem knew that protest was futile. "And 'stir yourself," Ham added as Mem started on the errand.

Mem did as he was told, and his gorge rose as he watched Ham pour the staggering dose from the bottle into the gourd, add water, and stir the mixture with his finger, which he wiped on the hair of his thigh. The gourd he set upon the hearth, propping the handle against the mantelpiece. "We'll keep it hot," he said, taking one final turn around before the fire. He was reluctant to leave the heat and to get into his bed.

At length he crossed the room, fell on one knee, stretching the stiff leg behind him, as he bowed his head and hastily repeated his simple prayer: "Now I lay me down to sleep; I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take." It was a mere meaningless formula, hastily uttered without a concept of sleeping or dying, of keeping or taking souls. He hesitated as if taking thought and added, "Dear God,

bless my mamma up in heaven; bless my papa and dreen his rheumatiz into Alph; bless Thy servant Hammond; bless Big Pearl and make her git well; bless Dite; bless Lucretia Borgia and the twins—"

"Mem, Masta, suh, Memnon. Ask God bless Memnon. Please, Masta; please, suh," the Negro interrupted the orison, assuming that white petitions receive more prompt attention at the Throne of Grace than black ones.

His master humored him and interposed for him, "Bless Memnon and learn him not to steal and make him a good nigger after his hidin' tomorrow; and, God, bless Falconhurst, and all the niggers on the plantation." It was little enough to ask. Falconhurst was a goodly place, and its personnel a goodly company. God should be flattered that His benediction upon them should be invoked.

Dite vacated the bed and assumed her place on the pallet beside it, and Hammond crawled upon the high bed and snuggled down between the sheets her body had warmed.

"Leave the can'le, boy. You'll be comin' back to drink that drench, right after you waits on Mr. Brownlee and your masta. If I a-sleepin', wake me up."

"Yas, suh, Masta," said Mem; and then he ventured, "I jest take the gourd along and drink that stuff before I lays down."

"You'll come back here, like I tol' you. You drink it now, you'll puke up so you cain't wait on the gen'lemen. Wrap that twin around Papa's feet good."

Mem escaped without making a promise. Ham knew he would come back, and Mem knew it, but he was bound by no promise.

Hammond lay and looked into the fire. His day was not finished until he had done his duty by Memnon and he did not intend to sleep until the Negro's return.

"Masta, suh, is you 'wake?" Dite asked tentatively, reaching up from her pallet to place her hand on the bed.

"Whut you wantin', Dite?"

"Masta, I knocked up." She had postponed telling him, in the knowledge that the tenure of her present sinecure would be limited by her advancing pregnancy. She had won her present status by the swelling of another wench's belly and would lose it by the swelling of her own. She could never be deprived of the distinction of having shared her young master's bed, however long in the past it might grow to be. Being supplanted because of her pregnancy would be no sudden derogation. To be the mother of a master's child would engender envy from the other wenches, and envy makes for status.

However, it was unlikely that the present relations, once interrupted, would ever be resumed. She could pretend to assume that she would be reinstated after her child should be weaned, but her figure would thicken, her breasts would sag, and Dite would be old. On a plantation of the size of Falconhurst, there was a succession of young wenches maturing at frequent enough intervals to render at least unlikely the summons of a once discarded wench back to her master's couch.

Hammond was dozing and was slow to reply. "I been a-lookin' fer that. How long ago?"

" 'Bout two months. I don' know 'xactly."

"I ben kind of hopin' you wouldn't be 'til that wench of Dido's got bigger. She right purty."

"That Tense nigger?" Dite knew her successor now.

"Yes, that her name, somethin' like that. Hortense, I believe."

"That triflin', skinny, brown thing? She ain't fitten fer you, Masta."

"She light yaller; she ain't brown," Ham defended.

"She not light like me."

"Yes, she darker'n you. You 'mos' white. But her color light enough. She right nice," he argued.

"She ain't got hardly no meat on her at all."

"She puttin' on meat. I was lookin' at her the other day—hippin' out good and tittie-in' up real full-like. Course her udders ain't full growed yet. That why I wishes you wait awhile, another six months."

"You don't reckon that Tense no virgin, does you?" Dite clinched her disparagement.

"Why, I reckon she is. Dido right moral-like."

"Dido moral, yes. But with that big brother of hern sleepin' right in the cabin, Tense's maidenhead shore gone, plumb gone," Dite declared hopefully. "I was a virgin, wasn't I Masta?"

"Shore was. Shore was. You wasn't no older than Tense that time. You was plagued and skeared of me till I had to slap your face and hold you down. You was real comical-like. Remember?"

Dite remembered that first, terrified but treasured night with Hammond well enough, remembered his ruthlessness and his tenderness, her own evasion and enforced submission. She could well laugh at the experience now, if it were not so soon to terminate.

Hammond made a mental note to caution Dido again about her protection of Tense and to send that young buck of hers to the stable to sleep. He lay quiet awhile. Mem had had ample time to see Brownlee and Maxwell to their beds. He wondered whether Mem's stubborn recusancy would extend so far as to fail to return for the draught mixed for him. Ham was already resolved to chastise the Negro as hard and as long as he dared without destroying his value; further disobedience could not aggravate the punishment. Ham wondered whether Mem would be astute enough to realize it.

The fact is that the chores of putting the two elder men to bed had been minor ones. Brownlee had been shown to a room without a fireplace. It was upstairs over the ell of the house and was cold. It was habit, however, not the cold that determined the removal only of his outer garments and prompted him to crawl into bed wearing undershirt, drawers and socks, none of which had been laundered or even removed since he left the Carolinas.

Brownlee's vocation made him unduly sensitive to any treatment he could

interpret as a slight. He so interpreted the absence of heat in the room assigned to him and especially the absence of a wench to keep him warm.

"Memnon, fetch me a wench to pleasure me tonight. Did you fergit that, too?"

"No suh, Masta Brownlee. My Masta never tol' me nothin' about no wench fer you."

"I tell you whut. Fetch me a likely, young, clean, light skin wench, an' I'll try to beg you off your hidin' tomorrer morning'. I'll tell Mista Hammond that you not no bad nigger at all. I'll tell him his pappy cranky—"

"Naw suh, don't tell Masta Ham that. You make him mad. He know Ol' Masta ain't cranky. He think Ol' Masta all time right."

"You fetch the wench, and leave the res' to me."

"Yas, suh; yas suh, Masta Brownlee. I will, suh." Memnon was uncertain whether he would keep his promise, but there was no harm in giving it. He was torn between his desire for mediation in his difference with his masters and the fear of acting without authority. The bribe the dealer offered was a tempting one, but he doubted Brownlee's will as well as his ability to divert Hammond from his policy.

And what wench? If the dealer's intercession was worth bartering for, was it not wisdom to supply him with the best in the quarters? Would his gratitude be the greater? Should he fetch Dido's Tense, whom Memnon surmised that Hammond had staked out for his own uses? A night spent with this white man could do a wench no harm.

Mem's quandary posed many questions, the right answers to which might evitate his flogging or at least mitigate its severity. Mem was not used to making decisions; decisions were made for him. He pondered the alternatives all the while he was putting his old master to bed, which, except for adjusting the boy to the old man's comfort and for so draping the bed coverings that the urchin could breathe, was a mere routine. Alph's unwaking torpor was so sound that he did not alter the position in which he was draped rather than placed. He could have been tied in a bow knot without knowing it.

Maxwell, sodden with his toddies, and somnolent with the unwonted lateness of his bedtime, was well nigh as complacent as the child. He sprawled on the bed while Memnon removed his clothes, the silence broken only by an oath or two when Mem had some difficulty in pulling his shirt over his head.

The light of the fire suffused the room, and the candle was hardly to be missed when Memnon took it with him and closed the door.

There remained for Mem only to go to Hammond's room to swallow the vile drench which awaited him there. The very thought of it caused him to shiver with nausea. He knew the violent sickness it would cause, the vomiting spell, the retching effort to vomit after there was nothing more in his stomach to disgorge. This would last all through a night of getting up and lying down, of trying to puke and wishing to die. He speculated whether he could make it downstairs and to the door before he should be overtaken by

the emesis. Would he spew the contents of his stomach all down the stairs and across the hall carpet before he could get outdoors?

Memnon hesitated before he entered Hammond's room, fearing the dressing down that was in store for him. Instead Hammond appeared to be in the best of humors. He even chuckled as he commanded, "Fetch me that gourd and that bottle. Wouldn't come back to drink the dose I mixed, eh? We'll jest mix it stronger," and he emptied half the contents of the bottle into the already potent mixture and handed it to Mem.

"That white gen'man say fetch him a wench. Whut wench I goin' to git fer him? Tense? Got to fetch her right away afore white gen'leman git mad and go to sleep," Mem sought to divert Hammond from the project in hand.

"You let that white gen'leman alone, and you let Tense alone. Hear? That nigger trader don't need no wench. I don' want that kind of dirty, nigger trader blood mixed up with my niggers."

"But he say—"

"And I say drink that gourd and git out'n here. And mind you strike the fires early in the morning. Lots to do come tomorrow. Now drink down that gourd."

Memnon held the gourd by the handle and slopped the contents as he sank on his knees by the bed to beg for mercy. "Masta Ham ain't goin' to hide Memnon tomorrow? Is you Masta, suh? Memnon your little boy. Memnon wait on you and take care of you and mix toddy fer Ol' Masta. Who goin' to serve you and mix toddy while Mem git well from the larropin'? I be good nigger, I be spry nigger, I won't taste the toddy. I won't do nothin'. Please, Masta, suh, don't hide Mem!"

"You goin' to mix toddy and do jest whut you been doin'; that's who. Needn't think that sore ass I'm goin' to give you git you out of workin'. You'll go on and work jest the same. Now drink down that gourd and go to the stable like I tol' you, and let me go asleep."

Ham's calm, which Memnon took for complacence, was a calm of anger. He was fed up with the boy's evasion and disobedience. His chuckle was one of anticipation of the satisfaction he was about to derive from forcing Mem to drink the ipecac. The dodge about the wench for Brownlee did Mem some harm.

Memnon's hand trembled as he lifted the gourd to his mouth. He sipped the nauseating mixture.

"Drink it down. Drink it down quick—ever' drop of it. Do you want to got to puke while you drinkin' it, and have to git another dose?"

Memnon drank. "Please, Masta Ham, suh, that enough. Cain't drink no more."

"Ever' drop. And drink it fas' afore you puke."

Memnon tried again—swallowed it all. He felt himself sicken and rushed from the room. As he went down the stairs, emesis began and he vomited all over the stair carpet. As he reached the bottom, still vomiting, he fell head-

long, prone on the floor, slime streaming from his mouth. He broke into a cold sweat. He lay there retching, too sick to rise. He worried about the mess he had made and was unable to clean up.

He thought of death. To die in his master's displeasure, he was sure of hell. He pictured the flames, smelled the brimstone, felt the pitchforks. And yet hell could not be worse than the persistent nausea. He wanted to die, terrified as he was of the eternal torture. He lay there slathering in his own vomit, too exhausted to move, too weak to turn over. He retched himself to a troubled sleep, only to awake with an urge to vomit. He could bring nothing up. He was aware that he would be punished for fouling the carpets, in addition to the other punishment in store for him. Would it be merely a longer and harder whipping? If only he could summon the strength to get up and clean the hall. He planned to be quiet so as not to wake the sleeping white men. He would clean everything up so that his masters would never know. He tried to rise, but couldn't. He could ouly retch.

Hammond had intended to make Memnon sick. He would cure him of stealing whiskey. He had not intended to poison him. The final addition he had made to the drench in vengeance for the boy's failure to return had come near to costing him a valuable property.

Lucretia Borgia rose at her accustomed time, shortly before the dawn, to prepare the breakfast. It was a part of Memnon's duties to build the fire in the kitchen fireplace, but he didn't come and Lucretia Borgia built it herself. She stripped Meg down and, laying him upside down gently between her knees gave him his daily pommeling with the open palm of her powerful hand. Mem's predicament, which a daily chastisement of the twins was designed to forestall for them, prompted her to a greater exertion. Lucretia Borgia did not admit even to her inmost self the pleasure she got from watching their naked sterns turn from brown to pink, and from the futility of their kicking within her vise-like hold upon them. It was for their own good. They were well-behaved young saplings and Lucretia Borgia was going to make them impeccable. Alph, of course, was not available for his before-breakfast bracer and it had to be postponed until his dismissal from his master's service.

Still Memnon failed to arrive. Lucretia Borgia grew uneasy and began to explore the house. No fire in the sitting room either! It should be warming. She got kindling and wood from the stack in the passageway, laid the fire, and fetched a brand from tlie kitchen to light it. She wondered whether fires were already burning in the bedrooms, started upstairs to find out and came upon Memnon sleeping in his own filth in the hall.

He was still too sick to explain anything to her. She lifted him to his feet, and half guided him, half carried him into the kitchen. The heat only made his nausea worse. Knowing not what else to do, she poured some whiskey from the jug—the last thing in the world that Mem wanted. He sought to brush it aside when she brought it to him. Lucretia Borgia held the cup to his

mouth and he, in his effort to drink it, spilled it down the front of his coat. It made him sicker, the very smell of it, and he vomited on the kitchen floor.

Lucretia Borgia surrendered in despair and disgust. She went about her business, leaving him in his lethargy. She had Mem's chores to do, as well as her own.

She called the first boy she could find, which happened to be Napoleon, and set him to cleaning the stairs and hall. She knew that Pole was not a trained house-nigger, and did not expect a thorough job, but she had to get rid of as much of the filth and stench as she could before the masters should get up. She was not concerned about Brownlee, despite that he was white and therefore to her a gentleman.

She loaded Meg's arms with firewood and herself carrying an even larger load strode through the hall and up the stairs, avoiding the filth on her bare feet as best she could, to prepare fires before which her masters could dress in comfort. The elder Maxwell was still asleep, snoring; but Alph's head protruded from the covers at the foot of the bed, and he proudly boasted, "Mammy, I got rheumatiz. I hurts awful, jist like Masta."

"Hush up yo' mouth and keep it hushed. You wake Masta and I goin' rheumatiz you fer sure," Lucretia Borgia whispered, but Alph's was the first good news she had heard this morning. She rejoiced in the improvement of Maxwell's ailment and even more that one of her sons had absorbed his pains. She did not doubt the truth of Alph's claim.

Meg stood beside his mother while she unloaded her arms and started the fire. She raked out some ash-covered embers and blew upon them to ignite the kindling. A heavy chunk toppled from the stack of wood in Meg's arms and landed with a dull thump on the hearth, grazing Lucretia Borgia's shoulder in its fall. The noise disturbed Maxwell, who stirred in his bed but did not waken. The boy did not wait for the retribution of which he was certain but began to cry, the tears trickling down his cheeks to blend with the dried ones from his earlier spanking.

Lucretia Borgia rolled her eyes at him in anger, but completed her task of starting the fire. She looked toward the bed and refrained from compounding the commotion. She picked up the fallen wood in her left hand, heaved her huge bulk upright from the position in which she had squatted on the hearth and beckoned Meg to follow her.

Once out in the hall with the door closed behind her, Lucretia Borgia turned on Meg. "Lookie here to me, nigger," she said, and Meg raised his head. She took a step backward to obtain leverage for her arm and slapped his left cheek so hard that it staggered him off balance with his load of wood. He was saved from falling only by the exactly timed blow upon his right cheek, which followed and knocked him upright. He knew better than to remonstrate. Besides, the impact of the powerful open hand upon his face was so great that pain was not immediately perceptible. The second slap had acted as a counter-irritant to the first. His cheeks did not begin to sting in earnest until he

followed his mother into Hammond's room at the other end of the hall.

Hammond was awake. He had told Memnon to make the fire early and the chill of the room had deterred him from rising immediately. He was refreshed from his fatigue of the previous night and had reached down to rouse Dite and had given her leave to come into his bed. Lucretia Borgia, entering the room, ignored the contortions that were taking place beneath the covers. Meg, however, while his mother unloaded the wood from his arms and laid the fire, could not keep his eyes from rolling toward the bed. He was not entirely innocent; he had overheard bawdy talk; he knew approximately what his master was doing. His interest in the activity in the bed made Meg forget about the smarting of his face.

As Lucretia Borgia laid the fire she noted that the ashes were cold and she sent Meg down the hall and into Maxwell's room to fetch a brand. He met his brother coming out, limping and rubbing with one hand the knuckles of the other. Meg's envy of Alph's ailment made him pause, forgetting for a moment the errand on which he was bound.

"Masta's misery dreened right through my belly," Alph declared. "It hurt awful, and my han's jist killin' me."

"You jest puttin' on, nigger. Hain't nothin' ails you, 'ceptin' you don't crave no spankin'. You thinks Mammy ain't goin' whup you 'cause you got rheumatiz, you a fool. Mammy all riled 's mornin'!" Meg warned and went into Maxwell's room while Alph went slowly down the stairs exaggerating his limp.

Maxwell ignored Meg's squatting by the fire until he had ignited a piece of kindling and had crossed the room to leave with it, when the old man demanded, "Wha' Memnon?"

"Memnon, he sick," answered the boy with diffidence and made an effort to be gone.

"That nigger ain't sick. He jest cravin' to git offn that touchin' up he goin' to git. He goin' to git it a'right. Nigger ain't sick," Maxwell said aloud but to himself.

"Yassum, Masta, suh," Meg would have agreed with any statement the master made. He was not exactly afraid of the stern old man, but he was ill at ease. He had never been upstairs before and what appeared luxury to him appalled him. White living was so complex. White men took more trouble to be comfortable than comfort was worth.

"Take that bran' along. Then, come back here and he'p me on with ma boots," ordered Maxwell, and Meg was relieved to get away.

Back in Ham's room Lucretia Borgia still squatted before the fireplace. "That nigger jest nasty hisself all over. Puke all down his clothes—all over," Meg heard his mother chuckle to Ham, who, without waiting for the fire, was getting out of bed.

"Wha' fer you stay so long? Cain't you see you makin' your masta dress hisself withoutn no fire?" Lucretia Borgia scolded.

"Ol' Masta say I come back and he'p with his boots."

"Then mind; mind, you hear? An' take care you polite," his mother cautioned.

Meg's eyes were riveted upon Hammond. He had seen many naked Negroes, but it had never before occurred to him that white folks removed their clothes. He had assumed that white gentlemen were disembodied angels, but they were flesh he saw, beautiful pink flesh covered with golden hair. So far from disillusioning the boy, the revelation augmented his reverence for white mastery. Power was reinforced by beauty. He longed to touch that flesh, to run his dark fingers through that golden brush, but knew well enough the *lese majesty* of the thought. He obtained but a lingering glance, but it was enough to excite a physical love. He had seen Dite in Hammond's bed and envied her the contact with him. In his jealousy, Meg hated the girl.

He returned to Maxwell's room and knelt before his seated master. Maxwell threw his socks to the boy and stuck his feet toward him. Meg put them on the old man, after which he struggled with the boots, preoccupied the while with thoughts about the pleasure it would be for him to perform the same office for his younger master. He dreamed of becoming Hammond's body servant. His imagination ran to the removal of Ham's clothes, to putting him to bed, and bathing him. That pink flesh needed to be washed from time to time. Or did it? Perhaps it was perpetually clean and required no bathing. There was no musk about a white man, unlike a nigger.

Meg recalled that Hammond seldom noticed him, and then only to reprove him, but he treasured every recognition he had ever received, approval or disapproval. Now he felt that even abuse from such a master would be acceptable, if only he might be near him and serve him—intimately. Meg's viscera stirred. Something had come over him. He didn't know what had happened to him, didn't know what he wanted. He knew that he was Hammond's slave in volition as in fact. He had seen a vision. His god had assumed a mortal form.

CHAPTER 5

THE skies had emptied themselves and washed the landscape clean. The sun had sprung above the horizon in a blinding glare. The only clouds to be seen were small scattered wisps that intensified the azure by their contrast. The wind sucked steadily at the wet earth, but had lost the fury of the night. The hot rays of the sun, early as the hour was, penetrated the flesh and warmed the marrow as one stood in the lee of things. Maxwell looked through the wavy windowpane and saw some of his Negroes squatting against buildings, absorbing the heat.

He realized that it was Saturday, a day on which work was not prescribed on Falconhurst. It was the slaves' own, to clean their quarters, to wash their clothes and themselves, to cultivate their patches, and to do their personal chores. It was too muddy to dig their gardens. Maxwell did not begrudge their leisure.

Maxwell, indeed, begrudged nobody anything. He opened and closed his hands and looked at them. The swelling of the joints had not subsided, but most of the pain had disappeared. His knees were hardly flexible, but he could walk without discomfort. He could hardly credit his senses. His arthritis, in part at least, had vanished. It gave him hope. That nigger boy had limped around the room. Perhaps the pain had indeed drained from him into the Negro. Maxwell was astonished. He had not anticipated such immediate results from the treatment. He felt a benevolence that approached gratitude toward Alph, despite that the boy had been employed in the experiment without his own volition.

Alph was too valuable a sapling to use for such a purpose, but he was clean and well formed and not musky. He was a Lucretia Borgia buck and had been sired by Memnon, had grown up in the kitchen. He was more acceptable for the purpose than some musk-tainted boy from the quarters would be. Of course, musk was no longer a problem; that red water neutralized it. He must remember to have the boy washed again in it before night. Whatever the value of Alph, Maxwell felt that if only he could absorb the pain, the crippling of the boy would be a small price. Besides, it would be possible to drain the rheumatism out of Alph into some less valuable nigger later on. Maybe it would be possible to get one of those Mexican naked dogs for him—if there really were such animals.

Maxwell sniffed the acrid odor of the damp carpet as he went downstairs, but, in his elation at his bettered health, was indifferent to it. He found Brownlee in the sitting room before the fire in something of a dour mood, still resenting the shortcomings in the Maxwell hospitality, the unheated room, the absence of a wench, the necessity to rise and put on his boots without a servant. Brownlee was used to worse quarters, seldom enjoyed a wench unless it was one he had for sale, and he could well put on his clothes without

assistance; but he felt the Maxwell slight to his profession, which was in fact real.

Maxwell called for Memnon and was answered by Lucretia Borgia. He ordered drinks—unwatered whiskey for Brownlee, a toddy for himself. When they arrived, Meg carried the tray and served them. Lucretia Borgia followed the boy to the door to supervise his deportment, which, aside from an impetuosity, a headlong will to please, was all that even his mother could have asked. Meg's pleasure in performing Memnon's duty was marred only by the absence of Hammond. Perhaps, if he were especially spry, his elder master would notice and remark to the younger white man that the young buck was a right likely nigger.

Hammond's first morning chore was to go to the pest house to see Big Pearl. As he entered the door she sat upright and reached with her arms toward him. He sat on the side of her bed and she grasped his hands and began to whimper.

"Whut ails you, Big Pearl? Whure you hurts?" Hammond inquired with a kindly tone.

"Don't hurts nowhure now. Misery done left me," Big Pearl replied, clinging to him. "Masta, suh! Masta, suh!" she wept.

"Don't cry, Big Pearl. You all right."

"Yessum, suh. I knows I all right, you here,—Masta, Masta."

"Whut you cry about?"

"You goin' to leave me, and then my misery come back. Masta, Masta, stay here, stay right here, please suh, Masta!" Pearl begged passionately.

"How was she all night, Lance?" Ham turned to the big buck who had risen on his entrance.

"First off, when you leave, suh, Big Pearl go off to sleep right nice. I set right here by fire all the night. Then she wake up and begin to howl and beller, and she keep that up until you comes in that door, suh."

Ham felt of Big Pearl's forehead. It seemed cool. He noted, however, a slight convulsive movement of her body when he laid his hands on her. He was baffled. There were no symptoms of the vomit or of smallpox. Possibly this was the evil effects of in-breeding.

Not because he thought it would do the girl any good, but because he did not know what else to give her, he poured out a dose of laudanum and held the glass for her while she drank it. She fixed her eyes on Hammond in an expression of gratitude that was adulation.

"I tell you, Lance, you put a bridle on that gray mule and ride to Benson and git that veterinary. You know Doc Redfield. You know the way to Benson, don' you?"

"Yas, suh, Masta, I knows him. He the white gen'man whut cure Nimrod las' year."

"You'll find him around the tavern or over at the grocery store, drinkin'. Tell him come right out to Mista Maxwell's Falconhurst Plantation. Kin you

remember that?"

"Yas, suh, Masta." Lance was elated at being chosen to go on such an errand. He could boast of it around the quarters and recount the sights he should see in the town. "I got to have pass, though, Masta. I don' want to be ketched up fer no runnin' nigger."

"I'll write you out a pass. Stop at the big house and git it. And be careful of that mule. Go easy like, and don't sink in the mire."

"Yas, suh. I be careful. I careful nigger."

"Better take a pocketful of pone, if you should git hongry," Ham warned, always thoughtful of the welfare, if not of the comfort, of his hands.

The opiate began to have its effects upon his patient, and Hammond went to the house to eat his breakfast. Meg heard him come in and limp down the hall. Without waiting for orders, he galloped into the kitchen and excitedly pulled at Lucretia Borgia's skirt. "A toddy fer Masta, a toddy fer Masta Hammond, a toddy. It fer Masta Ham," he insisted with impatience. His mother paused in her preparation of the breakfast to mix the toddy.

Hammond entered the sitting room and stopped to extend his hands to the fire and to turn before it ere he sat down, more from habit than from chill.

"Better drink a toddy, Ham," his father admonished. "Do you good."

Hardly had Hammond sunk into his chair when Meg rushed through the door, glass in hand. His impetuosity vanished, and he grew diffident as he approached his young master. He bit his lip as he extended the unordered libation to his pink and golden god, uncertain as to how his ministration would be received.

"Whut's this?" Hammond asked. He didn't have to ask; the thing was apparent.

"Do you good," repeated Maxwell.

"Whure did this come from?" Hammond said rather than questioned, nodding toward Meg. "This nigger better than the other one. Don't have to tell this 'un," Ham smiled at the boy.

Meg was abashed at the praise for which he had longed. He hung his head and chewed his lower lip as he returned a sickly grin. Then emotion overcame him and he began to cry. No cause for the outburst was apparent.

"Whut ails you, boy. Nobody ain't goin' to hurt you. You good boy," Hammond consoled him.

Meg knew it was sacrilege, but he was unable to restrain himself. He could no longer stand. His knees folded under him and he fell kneeling with his face between Hammond's legs. "I your nigger, Masta, I your nigger, Masta, suh. Say I your nigger, Masta Ham; jest your little nigger. Nobody's nigger, but jest yourn," the boy supplicated between his sobs.

"Course, you my nigger. Whose nigger you afeard you goin' to be? Course, you my nigger and you Ol' Masta's nigger, too," Hammond, uncomprehending, sought to comfort the boy.

"Yourn, yourn, not hisn, jest your nigger," the urchin cried. "Alph, Old Masta's nigger. I yourn, Masta Ham, please suh. I ain't musky, suh. I a-mind to be your boy, jest yourn."

"All right. You my boy," Ham laid his hand on the close cropped head between his legs.

"Whup me, then. You ain't never whup me, Masta, suh. Please whup me, Masta. Whup me hard."

"You ain't done nothin' to whup. You good nigger. Don't need no whuppin'," protested Hammond.

"Please whup me. Then I know I yourn."

To accommodate the boy, Hammond drew him across his lap and planted an accolade of five resounding slaps upon his upturned bottom. It was impossible to know from Meg's "Please, Masta" which followed each blow whether it was an imploration to desist or to continue. The grunt and the kick that followed each smack denoted pain, but when Hammond released him and placed him on his feet, the boy's face held a look of satisfaction, of ecstacy. No longer was there diffidence or doubt. Meg knew whose nigger he was. He could look Hammond full in the face to swear his allegiance, "You so good, Masta, an' purty. I loves you, Masta."

Lucretia Borgia appeared with the breakfast bell. Breakfast was late, but Lucretia Borgia had not been idle. She saw the tears on Meg's face. She knew that something unusual had occurred. "That little nigger been troublin' you gen'lemen? I'll skin him, I skin him till he cain't stan' up."

Hammond smiled at her and said, "You'll mind your business, Lucretia Borgia. That my nigger. I wants him skinned, I'll skin him. Keep your han's offn him." The rebuke was jocular and Lucretia Borgia knew her son had not offended.

Alph was duly posted beside the table, wielding his peacock feather brushes. He managed to move enough to display his limp. Lucretia Borgia pulled the chair to seat Maxwell, and Meg was alert and ceremonious in his withdrawing of Hammond's chair. He hastened to pull the napkin from its glass, to shake it open and place it in Hammond's lap.

Lucretia Borgia served the breakfast, but in all that pertained to Hammond's needs, Meg forestalled her. Ignoring Maxwell and Brownlee, he filled Ham's glass with milk, heaped bacon and eggs upon his plate, shifted the platter on which the cornbread was served so as to extend it with the largest piece on the side nearest Hammond.

There was an unstated rule that Negroes should not eat from dishes reserved for whites. It demanded no temerity now for Meg to whisper to Ham, "Masta, kin I eat whut you doesn't?"

"Oh, I see; that why you help me so good. You wants my leavin' vittles?" Hammond joked with the boy to his father's disapproval.

The accusation was unfair and the boy could only deny it with, "Naw, suh, Masta. I wan's you should eat all you kin, but, please suh, let me have

yo' leavin's."

"Course you kin. You my nigger, ain't you?" Ham had intended no rebuff to the child.

"Right offn yo' plate? Please, Masta, suh, kin I?"

"Right offn my plate."

Maxwell kept his eye upon Alph's limp. The more Alph limped the more Maxwell was assured of his own improvement. The brilliance of the weather and Hammond's relinquishment of his proposed, or at least dreamed about, Texas expedition had combined to modify the old man's discomfort. However, he doubtfully attributed it to the Negro boy at his feet and was as nearly grateful to him for the relief as it was fitting that an owner should be grateful to a chattel.

Hammond had noted his father's bearing without comment until he should be sure that he was better. His increased dexterity was apparent. He could raise his knife to his mouth with sureness and without flinching.

"You chipper, kind of, this mornin', Papa," Ham at length remarked.

"Better, Ham, better. I goin' to git well, now I's found the cure. See that little buck limp. The pizen is all dreenin' away. I goin' to git well and take this plantation offn your back. I'll straddle a hoss agin first thing you knows."

"Don't you worry none 'bout me. I all right an' Falconhurst all right."

"I knowed a nigger belly sovereign for rheumatiz. I tol' you," Brownlee took credit. "That man Bronson over at Natchez—"

"Wonder how Big Pearl come on," Maxwell declared. "You better go down after breakfast and see how she do, Ham."

"Done went. She some better, but Lancelot say she carry on all night."

"Better git Redfield," Maxwell advised.

"Done sent Lancelot."

"Damndest thing, Mista Brownlee, on this plantation. Cain't suggest nothin', not a thing, but it already been 'tended to. This Hammond think of ever'thing an' do it afore I gits around to talkin' about it. Jest have to nurse my rheumatiz, drink my toddies and stop my mappin' I reckon."

"Reckon Lance git through to Benson. Mire is terrible deep and thick," Hammond pondered.

"Ought to of put him on a mule," Maxwell suggested.

"I did a'ready. Ol' Gray."

"I thinkin' about that mire," said Brownlee. "Purty bad comin' in yestidy, worse this mornin'. Reckon them young bucks kin keep up with my geldin'?"

"Better set a day or two. Let the road dry. We got plenty of corn and vittles and a good bed. You right welcome, suh," Maxwell insisted.

"No, got to git goin', suh. Mighty pleasant here, thankee, but got to keep goin'. Want to git to N'Orleans and block them boys."

"Cain't make it further than Benson today over these roads. Worse beyant Benson. Might as well stay right here," Ham suggested.

"We'll see, We'll see," speculated the dealer. "This wind and sun dries out them roads right fast. Course I goin' to wait to see you thresh that nigger."

"Don' reckon he fitten to thresh this mornin'. He sick," Ham explained.

"Playin' off, more 'an likely," the trader was disappointed.

"No, he sick. I puked him out with a dose last night fer drinkin' that corn. I was mad an' I poured too much ipecac into him. He awful sick."

"Deserved it, deserved it. Wasn't more than right," said Maxwell.

"Wouldn't hurt to whup him, too, I reckon," Brownlee urged. "You promised him, you know. Ought to always keep a promise of a larrupin' to a nigger."

"I'll keep my promise all right, but not while he sick. No hidin' of sick niggers at Falconhurst. Besides, 'll do him good to relish his whuppin' a few days afore he git it. Let him ponder how sore he goin' to be."

"Cain't wait, cain't wait to see it, much as I'd like it. Always admire to see 'em squirm and hear 'em holler. Sometimes right comical."

Meg sidled to Ham's side. "Kin I see? I won' cry."

"See? See whut?"

"Memnon git hided," whispered Meg.

"Course you kin," Hammond promised. "Do you good. Learn you whut to expect."

"You spoils your niggers at Falconhurst, suh; spoils 'em till they putrid. No Saturday workin'! No threshin' when they sick! Veternary fer belly ache! 'D think the niggers owned you stead of you ownin' niggers," Brownlee voiced his disapproval.

"That, kind of fact," Hammond agreed. "One way our niggers does own us, and we owns them. They feeds us and we feeds them. Nothin' I craves more than good niggers, fat and well and happy—and a-growin'."

"Which puts me in mind," Maxwell pushed back his chair. "I have got to worm that wench. Lucretia Borgia, git me that betel nut that Mem pounded las' night and fetch that new little wench to the gallery. I'll need a spoon of black-strap, too, to make a bolus."

"Memnon didn't poun' no betel las' night, Masta."

"Yes he did. I tol' him to, and he tol' me he had. Besides I tol' Dido to empty out that wench an' git her ready."

"That lyin' nigger never pounded no betel, Masta, suh, sure as you born. You want anything done, whyn't you tell me? You kin 'pend upon Lucretia Borgia." She juxtaposed her industry to Mem's sloth.

"Remember that, Ham, when you whups that buck, an' pour on a few licks more. Not only he not mind me, but he lie to me that he had mind me."

"I skeared if I 'member ever'thing and pull more hide fer ever' lie and all there won't be no nigger left at all when I gits through. I'll jest whup him to kingdom come."

"We'll jest have to wait until that betel nut. Put Meg to poundin', soon as he eats. That pore little wench will jest have to hunger," said Maxwell.

"Mus' I?" Meg asked Hammond.

"Course. You heard your masta."

"You my masta. I your nigger."

"Yes, but he my masta, too. I his son, you know I does whut he say." Hammond was patient with the boy. "You minds any white man."

"Yas, suh, Masta," Meg agreed with docile earnestness.

The whites were hardly seated in the front room when Meg appeared before Ham and asked, "Does you want a toddy?"

"No, too soon after breakfast," Ham replied. But it was not too soon for Brownlee and Maxwell.

Meg retired a little crestfallen, but complacent. To serve his master was a joy, to serve anybody else a chore. He fetched the drinks and served them with politest unction; and when he passed his young master on his way out of the room, Hammond caught him a playful but sharp blow with his hand across the boy's seat. It caused Meg to drop his tray, and tears gathered to his eyes. As he stooped to retrieve the tray, he looked into Ham's face and blossomed into a wide and satisfied grin.

"Send that other'n here soon as he feeds," Maxwell commanded.

Meg acknowledged the command and hastened into the dining room lest the table should be cleaned. He picked up Hammond's plate with the food he had left on it, hurried into the kitchen and began to eat from it.

Lucretia Borgia saw. "Nigger boy," she said, akimbo, "You knows better'n eat offn white dish!"

"My masta said."

"Whut your masta say?"

"He said I could—right offn his plate. I ast him an' he say yes."

"I say no. Now scrape that feed onto that crack' platter and you two eat like you always does."

"My masta say," Meg persisted.

"Nigger, I'll smash you," and Lucretia Borgia stepped toward him with upraised hand.

A glare of defiance shot from Meg's eyes, mad, rabid, murderous. "Nigger, don't tetch me. Don't you ever tetch me. I bust this platter on your haid. My masta want me whup, he whup me; he whup me hisself. No nigger ain't goin' whup me."

Lucretia Borgia was taken aback, halted.

"My masta say I eat offn his dish, I eats offn his dish. Ain't no nigger goin' to stop me," the boy declared between bites. "My masta say you not whup me, you not whup me, d' you hear?"

Discretion was valor's better part, and Lucretia Borgia hesitated to disobey Ham's commands, no matter how casually given. She felt her authority vanishing.

"I Masta Ham's nigger now, jest Masta Ham's," Meg gloated. "My mouf Masta Ham's to feed, my bottom Masta Ham's to spank when he

want to. Masta Ham hang me up and skin me alive, he want to; he kill me, he want to. I Masta Ham's nigger," he impressed Lucretia Borgia. "Masta Ham whup me this mornin', whup me hard, harder than you kin," he announced, triumphant.

"Whut you do, nigger? Whut you do, makin' Masta trouble?"

"I not makin' my masta no trouble. I crave him to whup me and my masta done it. I speck he like it, too." Meg had finished Ham's food and had picked up the plate to lick it clean.

Alph had listened with trepidation to Meg's quarrel with their mother. He sensed that his brother's victory would redouble her tyranny over him. Meg turned to him and with contempt in his voice told him, "Ol' Masta say you come in to him, soon as you feed."

"Whut he want?"

"He want you; that whut he want. Cain't you do whut your masta say without as'in' ques'ions?" Meg was truculent. "You Ol' Masta's nigger, I guesses, Old Masta's sleepin' nigger. But I got the bes' masta. Ol' Masta ain't young and strong like Masta Hammond, an' purty. Ol' Masta cain't make you' ass sting an' smart like Masta Ham do mine. Now, go along to your masta."

Alph's limp, which he had forgotten, recurred to him. He rubbed the joints of his hands and limped away.

"Whure them things I got to pound?" Meg demanded.

"Whut things you got to pound?" asked Lucretia Borgia.

"Them bezils or whut they are, Masta Ham say pound for Ol' Masta?" Meg assumed authority and Lucretia Borgia accepted it. She took a betel nut from a small paper bag on the medicine shelf, fetched a flatiron and a hammer. Meg on his knees on the floor before the fire struggled with the elusive nut that jumped from under the hammer. He struck his fingers as often as he hit the nut, but he persisted until the chore was finished. He wondered whether Hammond would be pleased and praise him. He wished that Hammond might suddenly develop rheumatism that he might sleep with him in his bed and draw away the pain. He speculated whether he might not by contact absorb Ham's stiff knee. He was Hammond's nigger, wasn't he? And that is what being a white man's nigger meant—performing his labor, doing his bidding, accepting his abuse, humoring his whims, sharing his ailments and pains.

Alph had perfected a convincing limp, not too obvious but yet perceptible, as he crossed the dining room to the sitting room. He waited, unsure of the demand for him. He had nothing but Meg's word that he was wanted. The gentlemen were talking.

"Ain't no call fer niggers from the Texies yet; but they sure to be as time goes," Brownlee declared.

"I sure wish I could go there—not to stay, but jest to look around. If Papa hadn't got the rheumatiz, I'd sure be off. There's fortunes to be made

in the Texies, I know."

"An' surer fortune, fewer dangers, an' more comforts right here at Falconhurst. I knows boys. When I Ham's age, I crave to wander, too, jest like Ham. Hemmed right down here by my rheumatiz, he ain't had no blowhole fer his spirits. Even when he take a coffle to New Orleans, has to quicken right back home. With my rheumatiz betterin', he kin git around some, go to N' Orleans, even to N' York, at least kin go sparkin' some of these nice young ladies of good families, pinin' at home fer some handsome blade to come and marry 'em."

"Don't talk no more, Papa. I ain't goin' to the Texies, but I'd sure like it. I goin' to stay right here; you kin lay to it. Mayhap, I'll git around, go into town some, go to New Orleans and dress me up some. But, an' I stay here, whut I wants is a fightin' nigger to have me some sport with."

"You stay home and mind Falconhurst, Son, you kin have the bes' fightin' nigger in all Alabam. Don't pay to have a fighter, 'lessen you has a good one. You'll have a good one—the best."

Alph had waited, ignored. At length, he asked, "You send fer me, Masta, suh? I's here."

Maxwell resented, or at least disapproved of Hammond's trifling with Meg, was stern in his reply to Alph. "You knows better, boy, than to stick your mouf into white talk. Now, keep your britches on and wait whure you at, an' shut your mouf."

The frightened boy rubbed a tear from his eye.

"Ain't nothin' in fightin' niggers in this part of the county. Young fellers that fight niggers in country taverns ain't got no money to bet on 'em. They thinks a hunderd dollars is money. Ought to see a nigger fight in N' Orleans. Bets of a thousand dollars nothin'; some of them sports backs their bucks fer five thousand," Brownlee expounded.

"Young gen'men who fetched their niggers to Benson to fight ain't got much money to back they boys, you right, but they most generally brings along a good young nigger or two to bet with. All got niggers, or they pappy has," protested Hammond. "Young niggers good as money right in the bank."

"Gamblers in N' Orleans trains they niggers to fight, not jest strappin' bucks out of the cotton gang. They trained how to fight. They exercised and fed and petted up for the purpose," Brownlee continued.

"That whut I mean," said Hammond. "That whut I means to do. Git a fine, strong, young buck and learn him to fight, scientific like."

"An' them N' Orleans niggers knows they has to fight, an' they does. They owner tells 'em before they shove 'em in that if they loses the fight they goin' to brand 'em good or take 'em to the doctor to be cut. An' they niggers knows they means it. They fights an' fights an' don' give up. They claws and they chaws and they gouges like anythin'."

"N' Orleans a right sportin' like city, I reckon," said Maxwell.

"I see one fight between two French gen'lemen—that is between niggers belongin' to 'em. Big, young, yaller bucks they was, right purty, and trained down hard as hickory. Them niggers fit and fit all over that place for more 'n an hour and a half, first one a-whuppin' and then the othern. Them Frenchmen right game! Wouldn't neither one on 'em give up. Finally one nigger couldn't move no more. Everybody thought he daid; might as well be, all chawed up, big mouthful gone right outn his side, ear teared right off, jaw busted, jest a hangin', couldn't close his mouth, one eye gouged out. The winnin' boy not much better off, nose plumb gone, leader above his heel bit right in two, both wrists busted through, and back so broke he bellered when he tried to stan' up. Don't know whut them Frenchies done with them boys; wasn't much they could do, I reckon. Blood jest a spurtin' over everything—even ruint the fine coat of one of the Frenchies. Five thousand a side, but even the winner never made much. His nigger 'most worth that. I made fifty dollars that fight."

"I'd admire to see it," longed Ham.

"When you come N' Orleans way, let me know. If I there, I knowin' all about the fights. They kind of secret-like, but I kin git you in."

"Sure will, sure will."

"Ham ought to go roun' some and see things like that. Mayhap he kin buy a good fightin' buck in N' Orleans," Maxwell acquiesced.

"Course, oft times they turns half a dozen niggers all together 'tilln one comes out on top. Don't never bet on that, howsumever; cain't hardly never predick' the winner."

"The gent'men at Benson ain't never tried that," Ham declared.

"Look around, look around," suggested Maxwell. "Git you a boy. Has we got any fitten to train? Big Vulc?"

"He won't do. He coward."

"Well, look aroun'."

"Whut that boy waitin' fer? Whut fer you wantin' him, Papa?"

"I wants to see how bad he cripp'ed by this rheumatiz. Want to see how much dreened out of me. Come you here, boy."

Alph obeyed.

"How bad you cripp'ed?" asked Maxwell. "Whure you hurtin'?"

Alph hung his head. "All over, Masta, suh. I got misery all over me," and Alph believed it.

Maxwell grasped the boy, felt of his leg, twisted the knee until the child grunted with the pain. He manipulated the elbow so hard that the boy cried out. He pulled the fingers and bent them upward. He placed one hand on the boy's back and with the other forced the head backward contorting the spine until Alph screamed with pain. Alph was limber and flexible. He offered no resistance. He was pleased and interested in the attention bestowed upon him and sensed no indignity. By the time Maxwell finished his survey, the boy's pain was real, even if before it had been only feigned or imagined.

"Don' twis' the little feller so, Papa. You hurts him. You'll ruin him," protested Hammond.

"You too tender with these niggers. You ruin 'em your own self," said the old man. "But he got it all right! He got it! Wouldn't think so much pizen could dreen out'n me in jest one night." Maxwell was satisfied. "Be gone," he told the boy.

"Masta, suh, kin I be your nigger?"

"You is my nigger. Whose nigger you reckons you is?"

"I mean, your nigger, jest like Meg Masta Ham's nigger? Your own nigger? Please, Masta, sir."

"I'll do whutn I wants to you; that whut you mean?"

"I wants to bring yo' toddies and eat yo' leavin's—right offn yo' plate—like my brother do. I wan's you should whup me too, whup me harder'n Masta Ham whup his nigger. My brother brag over me sompin' awful." Alph's was no passion for service or punishment, such as Meg's. It was a mere desire not to be overshadowed and shamed by his brother, for which he was willing to pay a grudging price in work and pain.

"You my bed nigger. Ain't that 'nough? The other'n," (Maxwell assumed not to be able to tell the twins apart.) "The other'n ain't Mista Ham's bed nigger."

Alph was in a measure satisfied with this ascendency over his brother.

"Don' fergit to have your mammy soak you in that red water before evenin'. You gittin' musky agin," Maxwell warned.

Meg appeared with two saucers, one of powdered arica nut, the other of black molasses, and wordlessly set them on the table by the side of Hammond, who prompted him to transfer the saucers to Maxwell. Maxwell tested the powder between his thumb and finger, looking for unpulverized particles. Meg knew that he would find none, waited a moment for the commendation for which he hoped but which was merely evinced in the absence of comment.

Meg, *sotto voce* but peremptorily, instructed his brother, "Git that wench yo' masta goin' to dose, and carry her to the gallery. Ain't you got no gumption?" It was not for nothing that Meg was the son of Lucretia Borgia with her obsequious subservience to her masters and her domineering over whomever she could make her menials. He anticipated orders and executed them before they were given. He lost no opportunity to creep and intrude and climb into his master's grace.

When Maxwell rose to give the girl her vermifuge, he saw her through the window waiting in Alph's custody. Meg was out of sight, but lurked within easy earshot if Hammond should happily summons him.

Brownlee and Hammond followed Maxwell out into the sunshine of the gallery, watched him pour the molasses into the powder and stir it with his forefinger into a little, soft ball which he pushed far back on the girl's tongue, and held shut her mouth until she had swallowed the bolus, after which he

inserted his soiled finger into her mouth for her to suck off the residue before he wiped his finger on her dress. She offered no resistance to the unpalatable mess.

The little girl had lost her spriteliness. She appealed to Brownlee, "I's hongry, Masta. I hasn't et in long time."

The trader ignored her, but Maxwell answered, "You goin' eat. You'll eat lots, once we git them worms out'n you. We'll fatten up them ribs and put some meat on them legs."

He called to Dido, who came to the cabin door, black, wide and maternal. "Watch this wench, Dido, that she don' puke up that dose, and in about an hour pour some hot breakfast, sloppy like, into her—hot gruel or somethin'."

While Maxwell was engaged with the girl, Doc Redfield rode up the lane on his dun colored gelding, at which one had to look the second time to see that he was spattered with mud. A hundred yards behind him came Lance, riding barebacked the mule which had been gray when he set out two hours ago, but which was now so mud-daubed as to appear as dun as the veterinarian's horse.

Meg appeared out of nowhere to grab the horse's bridle when the doctor dismounted, but at Hammond's command transferred it, as soon as he came up, to Lancelot who led it along with the mule to the stable to be dried and curried. Meg did not vanish again, however, but lurked, listening, on the gallery, removed from the group. His eyes were fixed on Hammond. His mouth was open, and he appeared ready to spring in response to a gesture which was never made.

"Seem to be intrudin' into my business, sort of," Redfield said genially. "Always said Mista Warren Maxwell was the best veternary in the county. Takes better care of niggers 'n any man I know. I'd starve 'f I depend on him fer a livin'." He was a small man with a pointed chin, quasi-bearded, his face spattered with a mixture of red, black, and gray whiskers, too long to indicate that he had delayed shaving for some two weeks, and too short to appear a permanent adjunct to his face. "Whut you givin', Mista Maxwell?"

"Jest a-wormin' a little wench I got yestidy. Plumb full of worms. Some folks," glancing at Brownlee, "neglects their niggers till I wonders they don't rot away."

"Whut you usin'?"

"Betel."

"Turpentine on sugar is jest as good. Less trouble."

"Not and there's tape. Gits the belly worms all right, but not the tape."

"That's not whut you wanted me fer, I reckon?" Redfield suggested.

"No, Hammond sent fer you. He got a case fer you. Come sick last night."

Hammond extended his hand to Redfield, who remarked, "Don't seem no time at all sence you was a boy, no bigger'n that thar little nigger, a dog-

gin' your pappy's heels ever'whure he went. Comin' to be a man, ain't you? Spec' you thinks you is one?"

"Is a man, is a man. Ain't got time to be boy. Runs the whole plantation with me sick. Let me knock you down to Mista Brownlee, Doc Redfield. Mista Brownlee around buyin'," Maxwell explained.

"I've hearn of Mista Brownlee, before. Servant, suh."

"Yo' servant."

"Reckon you better be gittin' down to that pest house. Ham will see you down there. I too cripped up to go. Stop by and have a drink of corn before you depart."

"I'll go along," said Brownlee. "I'd like to see that big wench of yourn."

Maxwell stood on the porch, reluctant to be left behind and yet without the will to join the party. Meg kept his distance, but followed his master without appearing to follow.

Hammond told Redfield about Big Pearl's weird symptoms as they walked. "Reckoned better git you first thing. Don' want no epizootic aroun' here with all these young niggers. Might be vomit or pox."

"Not vomit this time of year. Your pappy know better'n that. Cain't be pox. Jest a little congestion of the guts, I reckon. We'll see."

"I know I hadn't ought to git you out in this kind of mud, but—"

" 'S all right; 's all right. I got to go out to the Widder Johnson's anyhow; Falconhurst ain't hardly none out'n my way. You know Widder Johnson?"

"Course, of course; out on Six Mile Road."

"Right likely plantation she got out there—small, of course, only a hunderd and sixty—but she makes right smart of cotton, and she got a passel of fifteen, twenty, good niggers Johnson left her."

"Her servants kindly old like, though," objected Hammond. "Ain't breedin' none hardly."

"Some is. That whut she call on me fer, to git her shet of a triflin' old cripped up wench, all deef and near blind. By rights ought to put an end to her long time past, but the widder kind of tender that way."

"Agin' the law ain't it—kind of?"

"Well, I sort of guess; but who goin' to take a hand in the pore widder's own business? Never hearn of the law a-meddlin' with sich things."

"Goin' to shoot her? Kindly disturb the servants, won't it?"

"Antimony. Somethink new. Leastwise I never hearn of it till lately. Come from a New Orleans doctor. Lets 'em down easy like. They never knows, an' the other niggers never knows."

"Never heared of it and I reckon Papa never heared of it."

"Ever need none, I got plenty. Jest send a nigger with a note. You kin give it your own self. Don' need me. Course, with a lady, like the widder, it's different."

"Don't never hope to need it. Our hands all purty young and sound," said Hammond.

"Never kin tell. Might git a-hold of a bad nigger—a trouble-stirrer."

"Might," Ham admitted without interest.

They had walked slowly down the hill toward the river in the sunshine toward the cabin used as an isolation ward.

"River still a-comin' up," commented Hammond. "Guess it won't rampage now, though. Rain stopped."

"Due to be fallin' soon, with no more rain."

"Don't hear Big Pearl carryin' on," said Hammond, opening the door.

Big Pearl lay on the bed in the corner, her eyes fixed in space. All her splendid energy was gone; a kind of languor enveloped her.

"How you come on, Big Pearl?" Hammond inquired.

Big Pearl raised her arm and extended it toward him. "I all right now, you come. Misery go right off." She grasped Hammond's hand and held it with her still powerful grip.

"Got the doctor to come, Big Pearl. He give you medicine to make you well. Leave him look at you now," explained Hammond.

"Don't need no doctor," replied Big Pearl. "Not no doctor's kin' of misery I got. My Masta stay with me, I gits well. Masta leaves, I dies; I shore dies."

Redfield placed a hand on Big Pearl's brow. He looked at her tongue. He took her pulse. He shook his head in quandary and puffed out his cheeks with wisdom. He turned down the covers and lifted Big Pearl's dress, kneaded her abdomen. She denied pain in the region.

"How old this wench?" Redfield demanded.

"'Bout fourteen; most fifteen," said Hammond.

"Shore powerful, that age. Look at them laigs—like oak trunks, but right shapely," commented Brownlee. "Shore do admire to see a big, neat wench."

"Virgin?" asked Redfield.

"Reckon so," said Hammond.

"Reckon so? Don't you know?" said the doctor with contempt. "Whut you doin'? Shirkin' your duty? Or is yo' pappy tryin' to keep you a virgin, too?"

Hammond blushed. "She too musky fer me."

"But it a masta's duty to pleasure his wenches—the first time. A strapping, good-put-together wench like this makes a man fergit the musk. Sure, she virgin. You ought to be plagued of yourself, boy."

"But bein' virgin didn' give Big Pearl no misery," Hammond declared in astonishment.

"Course it do. You know whut ails that wench? She's hipped. That's whut she is—jest hipped," declared Redfield positively.

"Kin you cure her?" Hammond demanded, baffled.

"I cain't, but you kin. She craves you to pleasure her."

"That don't make her sick, don't make her beller and scream all night."

"Yes, it do. Yes, it do. She fall off, maybe she die, an' you don't pleasure her; take that maidenhead, anyway. Don't you see how she grabs a-hold of you and hangs on? Ain' got no temperature, ain' got no pulse, tongue clean. Nothink the matter with the wench 'cept she cravin' you. Hipped, plumb hipped."

"I is, too, sick, Masta Hammon', suh. I sick," protested Big Pearl. "I isn't either cravin' you to pleasure me, Masta, suh—'lessen, 'lessen you cravin' to. I knows I black, I knows I got musk, I knows I not fitten fer you, Masta. I ain't bad, I ain't bad, Masta, I ain't bad." She rolled over on her belly and face down upon the bed sobbed long, long sobs, sobs of shame, of yearning, of disillusion, of blasted hope.

Hammond ran his arm tenderly under Big Pearl's body to turn her toward him and spoke to her in a low, confidential voice, "You ain't bad, Big Pearl. Nobody say you bad. You been sick, but you well now. Come along. Git up, and go back to Lucy. You'll be all right. We'll see, we'll see."

Big Pearl gave a lurch and was on her feet, pulling down her dress. She stumbled over Meg who sat on the step outside the door, listening for what went on. He picked himself up and scurried behind the cabin, lest he be seen by his master. Big Pearl galloped up the hill toward the quarters as if possessed. The three men watched her run, noted the power, vigor, suppleness and sureness of her gait.

"I tol' you that big wench jest hipped," said Redfield.

They wandered slowly back up the hill, the dealer and the veterinarian impeded by shortness of breath, Hammond by the stiffness of his knee joint. Some fifty feet behind them loitered Meg, innocent of eavesdropping but straining an ear to hear every word. It was empathy, and not derision, that prompted him to walk with a stiffened knee.

"This Widder Johnson, say she got likely servants? Wharabouts she live?" Brownlee speculated upon calling on her.

"Won't do you no good, goin' there. She ain't got none fer sellin'." Redfield was positive.

"Ain't worth your while," Hammond added. "Her niggers plumb played out, all too old fer anybody to want. If it ben't fer her yarb doctorin' and midwifin', she and her niggers would all starve to death."

"Reckon so?" asked Redfield. "I 'speck she kind of rich-like—well not rich, but tol'able, tol'able. Johnson left her right well off."

"Mayhap, mayhap. I don't rightly know. She right savin'," Hammond conceded.

"I ben a-thinkin' mayhap I'd pop the question today. My wife departed this life three or four year ago now, and seems like I don't git ahead none. The widder a-hintin' how she needs a man and all. Thought maybe it a good

idy to hitch up an' leave off vetinarin'. Kinder nice to settle down planter and not have to do no work."

"I reckon we cain't let a nigger git puny no more. Won't have no veternary to call on. As soon trust a sick nigger to Lucretia Borgia to doctor it as to git that Doc Simpson; kills more 'n he cures."

"Course I'll go on takin' care of Falconhurst hands. Cain't quit entire, and not have no reason to go to town. Besides, don' want the ol' woman to leave off her doctorin' and midwifin'," Doc reasoned.

"Papa will be glad."

"Mayhap the widder won't have me, but she ben a-hintin' fer quite a spell—leastwise I takes it as hintin'. I ain't done no sparkin', either. To speak true, it's kinder hard to spark the widder; she so fat and them warts all over her face and that black moustache of hern makes lovin' her up kinder loathy like. She right good natured, though, right hearty."

Brownlee thought of his sour, scrawny wife waiting for him in New Orleans. Redfield's description of Mrs. Johnson was enticing to him, despite warts and moustache. The pleasant plantation well stocked with likely servants was even more enticing. If only he were single, he would enjoy entering into competition with the veterinarian for the callous hand of the widow. If only he had access to some of that poison that Redfield talked about. It would work as well on a white woman as on a Negro. What had the doctor called the substance? Where could he buy it?

The party had arrived at the house. Maxwell they found ensconced in a comfortable chair in the sunshine on the long gallery. Alph sat on the floor at the feet of his master and both were sipping at toddies so hot that they could take only small swallows.

"Git out more cheers. Memnon, more cheers," Maxwell greeted them heartily. "Come in and set and drink some corn."

The taste of whiskey was unpleasant to Alph, but to sit at his master's feet and drink it was a triumph, notably a triumph over his brother whose master showed him no such indulgence. As Meg approached, he rolled his eyes in his direction, smacked his lips and devoted himself assiduously to swallowing the hot liquid.

Memnon appeared dragging a chair awkwardly. He was haggard and fearful of the whipping in store for him. Meg leapt with alacrity into the house and, struggling under its weight, brought the most comfortable rocker from the fireside and shoved it behind Hammond. Memnon returned to the house for another chair for Brownlee, after which he went to the kitchen for drinks all around.

Meg retreated against the house, his eyes on his brother, watching enviously each sip from his glass. But, when Memnon appeared with the drinks on a tray, Meg all but upset him, grabbed the lone toddy and carried it to Hammond, knelt by his chair and gazed at his face. "Hot enough, Masta?" he whispered solicitously. "Sugared enough?" He hoped for nega-

tive answers, but was ignored. "That Memnon cain't stir 'em good, Masta. Masta had ought to let me."

Hammond addressed his father, "I reckon as how we'll have to break this young buck in fer to take a-hold in place of Memnon. Mem seems a-fail-in'-like. This little buck right peart."

"Mem be all right after that hidin' you goin' to give him, Son, Matter with him is he flinchin' that trouncin'."

"Goin' to flog that Memnon?" Redfield was surprised. "Thought he a pet of yourn? Whut you ben up to, Mem?"

"A-slothin', an' a-thievin' and a-lyin'. Treated too good; my own fault. A little touchin' up here an' there and he'll be better'n new," Maxwell said casually.

"Never knowed you to flog a boy before. Don't do much threshin', do you?" Redfield asked. "I don't git none of your floggin' business."

"No, don't do much. Don't like it. Skears all the young niggers so, they stops they growin' fer a day or two. An' the trouble with sendin' 'em to you —besides you a-chargin' two bits a lash—is you welts 'em up with the snake. Nobody wants to buy a welted nigger."

"Everybody who sends a nigger to me fer to flog wants him checkered up a little—that's whut they pays me fer. Send him home withoutn no marks on him and they don't believe he trounced good. Wants 'em sent back to 'em raw like."

"Don't want snake-wales on backs of my niggers," Maxwell declared.

"Wants 'em to remember good, got to gouge a little meat offn they backs. Niggers fergits correction right quick," opined the veterinarian.

"Ever see my paddle?" asked Maxwell. "No nigger ever disremember havin' his rump squashed with that. Fetch it here, Memnon, an' don't use up the mornin'. You knows whure it hang—on the gee wall as you goes in the stable."

Memnon wished to avoid the errand. "I's afeared, Masta, suh. I's afeared o' that paddle."

"Do like I tells you!"

"Yas, suh, Masta, suh; please, suh." But Memnon had taken but five or six reluctant steps off the gallery when fear of the paddle begot a recurrence of his nausea. His mouth filled with hot regurgitation and he spewed his vomit over the ground. He retraced his steps to the corner of the gallery and kept from sinking to the ground only by embracing the post.

"That nigger still sick from that dose you give him," Brownlee laughed.

"Meg," Hammond said, "run and fetch that long paddle."

The boy, grateful for the command, shot off the porch in a loping run.

"Too sick to fetch the paddle. Reckon you ain't too sick to git some more corn fer the gen'lemen, are you?" Maxwell called to Mem, who summoned what strength he was able, and, with a muttered, "Yas, suh, Masta," went unsteadily into the house.

"I reckon I hadn't ought to drink no more," hesitated Redfield.

"Why not? 'S good, pure corn," said Maxwell, who sipped it all day.

"The widder might smell it," Redfield explained. "Well, one more won't hurt none, I reckon."

"Doc Redfield goin' to marry the Widder Johnson, Papa," Hammond explained.

The doctor was confused. "Allowin' she has me," he tittered.

"She'll have you, never fret," Maxwell affirmed, and added, "The widder right frisky—fer her age, that is."

"But virtuous," Redfield modified.

"Oh, yes, virtuous. I don't say naught agin' her. After Johnson died, she fondled up to me—kinder like. But I wasn't in'erested. My wife was a Hammond, you know; and after that—. Wish you happiness, wish you happiness with all my heart."

Meg galloped back, fondling the long paddle as he came. He laid it in his master's lap and leaped to grab Hammond's toddy from Mem's tray.

Hammond tapped the paddle on the floor to shake the accumulation of dust from it and then wiped it on the tail of Meg's shirt. "Not used so long, it gittin' all stiff. Needs oilin' up," he commented, extending the instrument to Redfield.

Redfield swished it back and forth through the air. "Right handy, I reckon. Sole leather? But whut's the holes fer?"

"To let the pulp and blood through. Mangles 'em up right bad—handled jest right by a strong buck. But they heals up nice and smooth. Don't leave no scars or welts," Maxwell expatiated on its merits, which Memnon trembled to hear recounted. Mem had in times past been called upon to wield the paddle, and knew the carnage of which it was capable. He shuddered.

Redfield jocularly grabbed Meg by the shoulder and pretended to strike him with the paddle. "How'd you like to have this on your little round butt, buck?" he asked the boy, who only looked into Hammond's face and smiled shyly.

"The gentleman ast you question, Meg. Answer him," Hammond cautioned.

"I Masta Hammond's nigger, suh," Meg replied.

"An' your masta never paddle you, eh?"

"I don' know, suh. He kin an' he crave," the boy asserted with pride. "My bottom hisn."

"An' someday I'm goin' to tear the hide right offn it," Hammond threatened, laughing.

"Is you, Masta, suh? Is you?"

The sunshine and toddies and absence of pain made Maxwell drowsy and he nodded off to sleep. He did not know when Redfield took his departure.

Brownlee arose and stretched. "Reckon I'll wander down and see about them bucks o' mine," he said.

"They fed and watered and looked after, Mista Brownlee, suh," Hammond assured him.

"Sure, sure enough, I knows; but I like to keep an eye on 'em."

"Unless you wants to stretch 'em a little with exercise," Hammond suggested.

"They git exercise on the road when we gits goin'." Brownlee picked up the paddle from the porch floor. "Shore would like to see how that work. Don' reckon that buck be well enough agin afternoon, do you?"

"Reckon not. Don't want to kill him. Kind of sorry I puked him out so severe last night. The nigger don't mean no harm, jest spoiled some."

"You an' yo' pappy jest too tender with 'em. I bet you ain't goin' to trounce that boy at all."

"Oh, yes. It promised to him. Cain't let him offn it now. About tomorrow or next day he take it."

Maxwell continued his nap, in which Alph, befuddled, joined him. Hammond picked up the paddle and took it into the house to give Lucretia Borgia instructions to rub neat's-foot oil into it to give it greater flexibility. Brownlee sauntered off in the direction of the stable in search of his two servants. He speculated about making an offer for those twins. He knew just where to place them. Perhaps it were better to go on to New Orleans and describe them to his client and obtain a commitment than to buy them at a large price and have them die on his hands or to be unable to sell them. He could well return. He had only some seventeen hundred dollars in his wallet, which he knew would not suffice, despite that the twins were young and hardly more than ornamental. He could count on getting forty-five hundred, possibly five thousand dollars out of that rich and fatuous Frenchman for them.

And that big Mandingo wench. How magnificent she was! He knew a gambler who would buy her; thought a virgin wench brought him luck. Brownlee turned off toward the cabins. He had to have another look at Big Pearl. He was a connoisseur of fine niggers, he believed. No really fine ones had ever passed through his possession, a few big, sturdy bucks, but all had something the matter with them, not truly prime. He aspired to deal in the fancy market—housebroken young bucks, nubile yellow wenches, twins, dwarfs or giants, oddities or monsters, hermaphrodites or freaks. He had once known a man who paid fully thrice its normal value for a young buck with a tail about five inches long, which amused the owner's friends. Brownlee had never had the capital for such speculation, although he knew where the profits lay.

He was not certain of Lucy's cabin. He thought he knew it. He had seen Big Pearl's flight to her home. The door stood open to admit the light and Brownlee entered. Big Pearl sat on the side of the bed, and out of the shadows appeared a monstrous, tall, raw-boned, lantern-jawed woman, a large

naked child astride the angularity which served for her hips. Except for the exposed pendent breast with which the baby toyed, Brownlee might have believed her a man in woman's clothes.

"Whut you wants, white man?" Lucy greeted him, irritated at his intrusion and frightened with the knowledge of his trade.

"I wants to see Big Pearl agin," Brownlee explained. "Shuck her down fer me to look at."

"Masta Hammon' know you come?" Lucy demanded.

"No, but I reckon he won't care if I looks over the wench. Come on, Pearl, shuck down," and the white man started toward the girl.

Lucy intercepted him, forced the baby into Big Pearl's arms and strode through the door, around the corner of the cabin and across the clearing toward the house, bellowing at the top of her mighty voice, "Masta, Masta, suh, white man rapin' Big Pearl; white man rapin' Big Pearl. Masta, Masta, you done tell white man rape Big Pearl?"

The commotion startled Maxwell awake. He staggered helplessly to his feet, calling for Ham. His summons was wasted, since Hammond could not fail to hear Lucy's alarm. So long and firm was Hammond's step as he strode through the door, loosening his gun in its holster as he came, that his limp was imperceptible. At his heels came Meg, eyes bulging, arms flailing. Alph, stupefied by the toddy Maxwell had prescribed for his rheumatism, opened his eyes, made as if to rise, and fell over on the gallery floor, asleep again.

Before Hammond could cross the open space, Mr. Brownlee appeared from behind the cabins, bland of manner, assuming an unconcern he did not feel.

"Whut the meanin' of this? You rape my wench?" Hammond demanded.

"No harm done, no harm done. Jest lookin' around your quarters a little. Never went near that nigger's cabin—'cept jest to stick my head in the door. To tell truth, I was a-lookin' to tell good-bye to that little wench I traded your pappy. I right fond of that little wench, suh." Brownlee knew he lied but he wasn't certain of how big the lie he was telling nor how incredible. He knew he had speculated about the feasibility of relieving Big Pearl of her irksome virginity. He believed that Hammond would be rather pleased than angry at his assuming the white man's duty. But that he had any serious intention of more than looking the girl over he doubted. He had downed three large goblets of whiskey during the morning, but no awareness of befuddlement.

Ham was coldly angry. He had difficulty in finding words, but when he spoke he spoke plain. "If you wasn' a white man, I'd kill you. I'd shoot you right through the belly." Hammond fumbled at his gun but did not draw it from its holster. "That Lucy never lie before, an' she not lyin' now."

Brownlee cleared his throat as if to speak again, but he found nothing to say.

"Git your geldin' and your two cripped bucks and git out of here. The

roads are bad, but Redfield made it from Benson and you kin make it that fur." Brownlee was reluctant to set out. It was not the first time he had been ordered away from a gentleman's plantation and he was not sadly embarrassed, but as Hammond walked away, the trader saw him dust his hands together and heard him say something *sotto voce* about "white trash." The epithet scalded him.

The dealer turned toward the stable. He saddled his own horse and rounded up his two slaves. There was no time for farewells. As he walked his horse past the gallery where the Maxwells stood silent, he called, "I reckon I jest ride by the Widder Johnson's whure they murderin' that ol' wench. The sheriff might be in'erested in that goin's on."

The two Negroes at a slow trot kept abreast of the horse. The shorter, black one was thoughtful and kept his eyes to the ground as if watching his foot with its two toes. The gangling yellow boy was in happier mood. "Goo' bye, Masta," he called as he passed the gallery. "Goin' to Kaintucky." He was silenced by the sting of the lash about his legs.

The sheriff would ignore charges brought by an itinerant Negro buyer against Mrs. Johnson and Doc Redfield for the killing of a slave. It was a minor crime at worst. The wench was old. Negro testimony meant nothing to the court, and Brownlee's accusation would have no validity against the denials of guilt from substantial citizens like Doc Redfield and the Widow Johnson. Hammond was none the less relieved to see Brownlee's horse as he reached the road turn to the left toward Benson rather than to the right toward the widow's.

CHAPTER 6

LUCRETIA BORGIA called the twins, scrubbed their hands and faces and put freshly washed clothes on them before dinner. Alph in a kind of torpor brushed flies, which were aggressive on this bright, warm day. Memnon brought the food to the table and served Maxwell, but Meg hovered about Hammond, seated him, filled his plate, poured his milk and was resentful that Memnon presumed to fill the younger master's coffee cup. He grabbed the cream pitcher and doused the coffee, reached for the molasses and sweetened it, took a teaspoon that dangled from the caster and stirred the coffee. He would have liked to wield Hammond's knife and fork and to shovel food into his master's mouth. He was alert to forestall his every desire, to save him every gesture he was able. If he had been capable of counting, he would have counted the bites he took.

One fly got through Alph's barrage and landed on Hammond's plate. Meg grabbed his fan, and, with a withering glance at his brother, began to swing it violently.

The conversation was meager and desultory. "Reckon I has to pester that Big Pearl some," Hammond remarked as much to himself as to his father. "Doc Redfield reckon that what ails her. Seem like some of these bucks would pleasure her as well as I kin."

"Wenches craves they master the first time, an' Big Pearl right splendorous."

"She so big," objected Hammond.

"You ain't never try no big gal like her. They got somethin' your purty yaller wenches ain't got."

"Musk," answered Ham.

"I jest broke you in wrong, Son," declared his father. "Ifn I didn't have this rheumatiz—," he sighed. "Course, if you don't hanker to, Big Pearl cain't make ye; but I always took care of 'em first time, specially if I laid off to keep 'em fer breeders."

"I reckon I kin," conceded Ham.

"I better look at them young bucks I traded fer yestidy. Do you reckon they's somethin' the matter with 'em that I didn't find? That son-of-a-bitch too gladsome, seem like, about that trade. Wish you fetch 'em shotes up to the gallery, finish your dinner."

Hammond delegated the chore, "Meg, go down to the stable and drive them two new ones up fer your masta, after dinner, hear?"

"Yas, suh, Masta, suh. I git 'em fer you, Masta."

As soon as the white men had gone from the table, Meg took Hammond's plate with the victuals he had left into the kitchen and set it to one side. Then he bounded out of the place to bring the new Negroes from the stable. The two, strange and excluded from the play of the other youngsters, were

shy and reluctant to obey Meg's peremptory commands. The new boys were larger than Meg and his only method of enforcing them was to repeat, "Masta Ham say—." At length he picked up a lath and struck one of the boys on the back and the boy, deciding to accept his authority, moved forward. Meg turned to the other, but didn't have to strike him. Lath in hand and walking behind them, Meg herded the two toward the house.

On the way, Meg described to the boys the torments to which their master was about to subject them. As Meg's imagination waxed, these grew from flogging, to branding, to castration, which he described vividly but quite inaccurately. Their faces blanched from shiny black to a cold, dirty gray, as they heard with terror what was about to be done to them. They huddled together while Meg bounded into the house to report their presence to Hammond.

When Meg reached the kitchen and sought his plate, he found that the food had been scraped from it into the broken platter from which his brother was already eating. He began to cry and refused to eat.

"Masta Hammon' say I eat right offn his plate," he declared to Lucrètia Borgia.

"Won't hurt you to eat with your brother. You ain't no better'n him. Now, eat your dinner. 'Cause Masta Ham cods you about bein' his nigger, you gittin' out of han'. You got to be hided, got to be skinned, spankin' not good enough fer your ass no longer," his mother threatened.

"Nigger, if I gits skinned, Masta Ham skin me. Keep your black han's to yourself. I don' want no dinner. I goin' to tell Masta."

"Tell Masta, you wants to. Ain't goin' to do you no good. Who you think brung you? Who suck you? Who raise you? Masta Ham ain't yo' mammy!"

"No, but he my masta, an' I goin' tell him," and Meg went through the door.

The Maxwells, father and son, were engaged in examining the black saplings who stood naked and frightened before them. The new boys were chunky, broad shouldered, short of neck, bullet headed, with flat bridgeless noses, wide nostrils, thick lips, almost black, and on the fat side. Their ages were uncertain and unknown to them, but Hammond estimated them to be about fourteen years old; Maxwell guessed fifteen. They were still tired from their journey through the mud and under the whip, and they were shy in their new environment. They shambled on wide thick feet, obeyed commands willingly but uncertainly.

"You don' got to finger 'em so much, Son," Maxwell declared from his experience. "Ifn you cain't tell a good nigger from lookin' at it, you'll never find out a-feelin' it over. Ought to have 'em washed before you goes a-handlin' 'em, anyway."

"I cain't find nothing wrong with 'em. Right good deal you made, fur as I kin see," Hammond declared.

"Course, they common—nothin' fancy like, but they soun'. Brownlee didn't cheat me none—and I got boot."

"An' they matched up. Course, they hain't twins—but they almost. One a little heftier than the other, and not quite so black."

"Brownlee said he reckoned they had the same pappy, but they dams are different. Too much of an age to have the same mammy."

"But we kin sell 'em as a pair—bring a bigger price together. Brownlee ought to know that, even with jest cotton niggers, buyers likes matches."

"Needs time before sellin'. They got a lot of growin' in 'em yet," said the father.

"Shore has," affirmed Ham, pleased with the bargain.

Meg had waited for the conversation to falter. He approached Hammond and pouted, "Masta, suh, that nigger won' give me no dinner."

"Whut nigger?"

"That Lucretia Borgia. She scrape everythin' on Alph's platter. Won' give me none. Me, I'm hongry. She say she goin' skin me."

"Whut you do?"

"Don' do nothin', don' do nothin'. 'Ceptin' I wants to eat your leavin's—right offn your plate, like you say. That nigga scrape your leavin's on Alph's platter."

"Won't Lucretia Borgia let you eat with Alph?"

Meg began to cry.

"Won't she? Answer me!"

"Yas, suh, Masta—but you say, you say I to eat leavin's right offn your plate, your plate. An' you say that nigger not whup me. You say. You say you whup me. I yourn."

"You go back to that kitchen and eat with Alph, or I will have to whup you," warned Hammond. "And sen' your mammy out here."

Meg scurried off disgruntled, but when Lucretia Borgia came, he lurked within the door to overhear what his master might say.

"Lucretia Borgia," Hammond said, "Meg want to eat offn my plate."

"Yas, suh, Masta. That little shote gittin' too uppity. Cain't do nothin' with him. Don' even crave that I should whup him no more. Say you whup him."

"That's right. You wants him whup, you tell me an' I whup him. Don' rightly need whuppin', no way."

"I likes to whup him ever' mornin'. Good fer him. Cain't whup the othern 'cause he say he got rheumatiz."

"Then don' whup neither one."

"I whup mine, he need it," interposed Maxwell. "I gittin' well enough to han'le a saplin' like that."

"An' let Meg have my leavin's ifn he want 'em. He clean. He won't hurt them plates."

"Yas, suh, Masta. Ifn you say." Lucretia Borgia looked at the father for

his disapproval.

"You doesn't mind eatin' offn a dish a nigger has et from, does you, Papa —after it ben washed?"

"I was raised up on black tittie-milk, an' you was too, Son. Didn't pizen me none, I reckon. Niggers usin' white dishes don't spoil 'em none. Woman's idy—a Hammond idy."

"Yas, suh, Masta," Lucretia Borgia accepted the inevitable. "Does you want that nigger should have a fork, too, and a napkin to wipe on, and a chair to set in?" she inquired with irony.

"Sho' enough. Why cain't he?" said Hammond.

"An' the other'n, too," added his father. "Whut one gits, the other'n gits."

"You spoilin' that Meg. Already ruint that nigger boy, sho' as you born. He'll be triflin' as his pappy."

"He my nigger, remember. Treat him good and feed him plenty."

Meg knew the interview was at its end and scurried back to the kitchen. He was eating what Alph had left on his chipped platter when Lucretia Borgia entered, muttering. He had heard Hammond claim him as his own, but concealed his elation. "Whut Masta want?" he asked.

"Masta say you no better'n Alph. That whut Masta say. Masta say make you eat your dinner. Does you wants another laig o' that chicken?" she answered him, and then exploded, "Blabber mouth!"

Lucretia Borgia watched the boy eat his fill. When he had stowed away all he could hold, she grabbed him in her great arms, carried him across the room, and sat down npon a low stool before the fire. She squeezed him painfully against her huge, hot body, and her tears fell on his head. Her fallen angel, her lost lamb. She vacillated between execration and devotion. She loved him as her baby; she hated him as her rival. His nature was too much like her own.

CHAPTER 7

"BUT I don' crave to git married, Papa. Whut I craves is a fightin' nigger," Hammond replied to his father's solicitude. The elder Maxwell's desire for a grandson, white, an heir, was persistent.

Supper was over and the two slouched over toddies before the fire. The night was balmy, but the fire was comfortable. Meg had rushed in to remove Hammond's boots, forestalling Memnon in that duty. He knelt in front of Hammond and tugged, and when a boot suddenly slipped off it threw the boy backward. He peeled off Hammond's socks, and, instead of drying the feet with his hands, as Mem had done the previous night, Meg leaned forward and wiped them on his kinky hair. Before he shoved the slipper upon the second foot, he embraced it and rubbed his cheek against the white flesh. He half expected disapproval, but Hammond failed to notice the gesture or the questioning, diffident smile that followed it.

"Kin have a wife and a fighter, too, I reckon. Don't aim to sleep with no fightin' nigger?"

"Besides, I don' know no young white ladies," objected Hammond.

"Why, why, there's Miz Daisy Prescott, over to Sommerset Plantation. Right good family—the Prescotts; and she'd jump to git you."

"Yes, I knows Miz Daisy Belle. Right respectable and all; real purty an' you likes 'em dark. But Miz Daisy Belle older'n me; she goin' on an ol' maid. Must be twenty-one, twenty-two year ol'."

"An' then there's your cousin, Miz Blanche Woodford, an' you likes 'em light and you likes 'em young. Cain't be more 'n sixteen and has hay-color hair, at least did have time I seen her. You remember her."

"Cain't say I do," Hammond denied.

"Yes, you do. Went to Crowfoot Plantation with yo' mamma to visit her Cousin Beatrix when you little. Miz Woodford your mamma's cousin, a Hammond, too—gal of ol' Orestes Hammond who was brother of Theophilus, your mamma's papa."

"How you keep it all in your head, who kin to who?"

"It's 'portant. Got to know who you kin trust. Blood outs. Orestes Hammond no such man as ol' Theophil—a drinker, kind of, drunk hisself to death. Howsumever, he a Hammond—good blood. Major Woodford, Miz Blanche's papa, of a good family too—his mother a Sitwell. Got Crowfoot Plantation from her side; added to it and built a new big house, hisself, howsumever."

"Whure is Crowfoot?"

"Over beyant Briarfield which is beyant Centerville, near as I kin tell. Everybody in them parts knows Major Woodford and Crowfoot."

" 'Bout fifty mile, ain't it?"

"Nearer sixty, mayhap sixty-five."

"Not the place whure a boy had the billy-goat hitched up to a cart and let me ride?"

"That the place. Now you remember. That boy was Richard—older than you. Then comes another boy, younger than you, name of Charles I believe. Then Miz Blanche. And there was still another'n, a baby, boy or gal I disremember, but it died. Blanche is the youngest livin'. You real taken with that billy!"

"I don't remember the gal."

"You right young then—about five. Before—, before I put you on that geldin' pony."

"Long piece to go to git a wife," sighed Hammond.

Alph came in and took his place on the floor between Maxwell's chair and the fire. He was naked, ready for bed.

"Boy, did you soak?" Maxwell asked him.

"Yassum, Masta, suh," replied Alph, rolling his eyes questioningly, as if he did not expect to be believed.

"Come here and let me smell you."

"I soak. I don't shed off no musk," said the boy, rising to comply.

Maxwell sniffed at him, raised his arm to smell under it, pulled back his foreskin. "You all right. You doesn't stink bad. But set away from the fire. Don' want you sweatin'. Evenin' ain't col'. Want a toddy to cure your rheumatiz?"

"I ain't never had no truck with a white lady. I wouldn't know whut to do," Hammond confessed.

"Why, if you sees one you wants, you asts her papa, kin you ast her. He say yes, and then you up and asts her. All there is to it."

"I don't mean that. I means goin' to bed. Goin' to bed after you marry. How you ack?"

"Don't fret about that. You'll ack all right. No trouble. The gal won't know how to ack either, supposin' she a nice gal."

"Treat 'em jest like they was a nigger wench?"

"Jest like a wench. That is, not exactly. A nigger knows whut you goin' to do. White lady doesn't—not the first time. She modest. She makes out to cry. Mayhap, she scream and holler."

"And won't let you?"

"You loves her up and kisses her, and she let you all right at las'."

"Kisses her? I no good at kissin'."

"You gits so you likes to kiss 'em, kinder. I knows you doesn't kiss your wenches. White ladies, you has to."

"I kissed my mammy when I was little."

"Course, of course. I means you don' kiss your bed wenches. You jest pleasures 'em and lets 'em go. You asts a white lady; you doesn't tell her. White ladies doesn't like pesterin', but they submits, they submits to their husband. It's their duty, their married duty. Sometimes they slow, and you

has to promise 'em somethin', a new bonnet or somethin'. But they submits. Leastwise, your mamma did."

"An' you cain't have no more wenches? Whut you do when your wife git ol, twenty-five, maybe thirty?"

"Course have wenches, jest the same. You doesn't talk about 'em, frontin' your wife, but she know you have 'em. She want you should have 'em. Saves her from havin' to submit."

"A white lady better'n a wench?"

"Better? No, wouldn't hardly say she better. But you got to have a wife in order to have children—white children, that is, real children, your own, sure enough children."

"I knows. I knows that."

"Another thing. You cain't shuck down afore you gits in bed with a white lady. Always keeps on your shirt and drawers. Plague a white lady mos' to death to see a man nekid."

"Kindly unhandy like, ain't it?"

"Not as unhandy like as the riggin' she wears to keep you from seein' her. Wears a chimmy that button plumb up to her neck an' comes clean to the flo'; covers her right up all over."

"Not in New Orleans. They white ladies there that strip all off, ever'-thing. I seen 'em last trip—"

"Whores. They's whores. That different. Not much better than niggers. Some of 'em not even as good," declared Maxwell in disgust. "Lets you see their brestes nekid, even lets you finger 'em."

"They right purty—white skin and all."

"Don't you let me ketch you pesterin' around no white whores, Son. You gits crabs from 'em, and clap and everythin'."

"I didn't, Papa, I didn't, but I seen 'em."

"When you go to New Orleans again, come fall, you better take Dite, or some wench, along. We knows our niggers clean; won' give you nothin'."

"Cain't take Dite. She'll be jest about foalin' in the fall."

"She knocked? You has worse luck with your wenches 'n anybody. Only been pesterin' Dite three, four months. Dite might bring a right likely sucker, though. Your other git has been right prime. You growin' older and stronger; your git ought to be even better'n ever."

"Ain't none of 'em with stiff knee. First thing I looks fer in my suckers."

"Ain't likely—not in first crossin'. Liable to find some stiffness in your grandchildren, not in all of 'em, course, mayhap not any."

"Kindly like to keep my own, the wenches anyhow, fer breeders."

"Good idy. That Hammond blood had ought to give a nigger some quality. But don't turn your son to 'em—that knee sure to show up comin' from both sides."

"Ain't got no son, yet, Papa. Not no white son."

"You goin' to have. You goin' to have," predicted Maxwell in confidence.

"Mayhap, I'll ride to Crowfoot Plantation to see Cousin Blanche Woodford next week or week after—before plowin' time set in. Kin you git along?"

"Fer that, sure enough kin. Won't have to do nothin'. Jest give the niggers a rest, kinda, before plowin'. Anything has to be done, I'll save it up fer your back coming."

"Long trip—jest to see a lady, see if I'm a-wantin' her or not."

"And on your way back you kin turn off to Coign and ast old man Wilson fer the loanin' of that old Mandingo fer Big Pearl and Lucy. Reckon they still got him at Coign."

"Take a day more, mayhap two, accordin' to if the roads is good."

"Take your time. I'm set—kinder like—on that Mandingo. And you might look around some fer that fightin' nigger you a-wantin'."

"I had thought of that," said Hammond.

"Thought of that, mayhap, more than of gittin' you a wife."

"A wife is discouragin'—kinder like. But I guess that ever' man has got to have one."

"A man o' property anyhow. You a man of considerable property, will be; an' it look like you'll have more—unless you wastes it all on fightin' niggers an' sportin' around."

"I doesn't sports, an' you knows it. This fighter I'm a-layin' off to git ain' no sport. It jest a way I sees to pickin' up some good young niggers without costin' nothin'. Course, fightin' him means takin' him to Benson and around to other towns Saturdays, gittin' a chance to see folks—but that not sportin'."

"Ifn you buys you a fightin' nigger, buy you a good one—one that kin win. A losin' fighter worser than no fighter at all."

"That whut I means," explained Ham. "Most of these men who fights niggers ain't got no fighters. They thinks jest any big buck outn the cotton gang good enough to fight with, an' he big enough."

"An' train him. Harden him and practice him an' learn him how to fight."

"That whut I goin' to do—if only I finds me a buck that suits me an' kin buy him."

"Mayhap git one in New Orleans, like Brownlee tell about, in the fall when you go there, an' you don't find one sooner."

"No, suh, Papa. Don't want none o' them bad niggers, like them sports uses fer fightin' in New Orleans. Ruin all the good niggers on the plantation."

The clock interrupted the talk by coughing out the wrong hour. It was eight o'clock, with allowance for error a quarter after eight.

"I don't hold none with keepin' late hours, like last evenin'. Better go up," said Maxwell, yawning. "Let Memnon take you first; he kin come back fer me an' the little buck."

"Goin' to drink another toddy?"

"Reckon not. I had enough."

Memnon was summoned. He picked up Hammond's boots to take them upstairs. "Ain't fergot about that floggin' you promised this buck, is you. He all well again. Ain't you, Memnon."

Memnon did not commit himself.

"Cain't do it tomorrer. Tomorrer Sunday. Don't want no floggin' on Sunday."

"Don't fergit it. I hones to hear him yelp a little," said the older man.

"I'll make him yelp. I got to have me an all-over washin' tomorrow. Didn't do no bathin' the week before—begins to feel sweaty-like."

"All this washin' ain't healthy—not in winter time. You washes all the sap outn you. Swimmin' in the river now and agin in summer time don't do no harm agin you careful to dry good, but washin' in hot water in winter is real dangerous."

"Won't hurt me none. Never has. I be careful," Hammond promised.

"Too clean. Too clean like. Got so young folks is so fine haired they cain't stan' a little sweat."

"I'd wash more even, if it wasn't so hard to manage this leg in that round washtub. Cain't squat."

"Only thing about your leg I glad fer, Ham. Keeps you from washin' so much. All my fault; all my fault, your mamma always said."

Hammond kissed the tobacco-stained cheek of his father and limped away, followed by Mem carrying the boots. The older man listened to hear the uneven steps upon the stairs.

As the young man approached the head of the stairs, the candle Mem carried illuminated a small figure rising from the top step, which turned out to be Meg.

"Whut you doin' up this hour?" Hammond asked.

"I waitin' to serve you, Masta, suh."

"To serve me?"

"Yas suh, Masta. I wants to strip your britches off and see you to bed, Masta, suh, please, suh."

"You too little. Git along to the pallet with your mammy."

"I's strong, suh, Masta, even if I little. I your nigger, suh, Masta. Ain't I yo' nigger?"

"All right. All right. Give him the candle, Mem, and them boots."

Mem had prepared a plea to be let off his whipping and had been waiting to get Ham alone to prey upon his sympathy. He was consequently disappointed at Meg's interference. He was safe through tomorrow, and might be able to get in his speech while he helped Hammond with his bath in the morning. However, obsessed by the prospect of being punished he was unable to wait.

"You not a-goin' to whup Mem tomorrer, Masta?" Mem spoke of himself in the third person when he sought compassion.

"No, mornin' is Sunday. We'll have to put it off."

"Mem still sick, Masta. That nasty dose you give him make Mem real sick."

"That whuppin' you in fer make you sicker."

"Mem good nigger, Masta. Mem try to be good nigger," he pleaded.

"Mem goin' to be a good nigger or a dead nigger, time I gits finish' with him."

"Please, Masta, let Mem off. Don' whup Mem, please, Masta Hammon'."

"But I promised you. An' I promise you a fresh wench or new shoes, you expect me to keep my promise, don' you?"

"Yas, suh, Masta, you always does."

"An I promise you a lambastin', an' you goin' to git lambasted good."

"Don't hurt Mem, Masta, suh. Don' hurt Mem. Mem loves you, Masta. Mem Masta's little boy," he begged.

"Mem's Masta's big triflin' nigger. Won't hurt much—jest a little touchin' up here and there. Jest a few patches of hide offn your backside with that *pimentade* rubbed in to heal it up. You'll be settin' right down in a chair withoutn no cushion in a week or two."

"*Pimentade?* No *pimentade,* Masta. Please, suh, no *pimentade.* That make a nigger squeal worser than the larrupin'."

"Plenty o' *pimentade.* That stuff cheap. Now, go down an' take care of Papa. See to it his feet right next to that Alph's stomick."

"Goin' to whup that Memnon hard, ain't you, Masta?" Meg would not let the subject rest.

"I reckon he need it, hard," said Ham resuming his progress down the hall.

"Kin I help, please, Masta, suh?"

"Help whut?"

"Help you in whuppin' Memnon?"

"You too little. Cain't sling that paddle. Have to have Vulcan or Pole or one of 'em."

"I kin rub on that stuff, that burnin' stuff."

"*Pimentade?*"

"Yas, suh, *pimentade.* You goin' to rub my ass with *pimentade* when you hides me?" Meg inquired with relish.

"You doesn't need hidin'. You a good buck; works good."

"I your nigger, Masta. I youen's own nigger."

"Yes."

"An' I had a nigger, I'd hide him. Let him know fer sho' he my nigger."

"Well, mayhap I better hide you, you wants it so bad."

"Is you, Masta? Is you a-goin' to?" Meg seemed elated at the prospect.

Dite on her pallet beside the bed was awakened by the candlelight and the talk. She rose upon her elbow and asked, "Whure you want me, Masta, suh, in the bed or on the floo'?"

"Better git in bed a little. Mayhap I wants you. Didn't need no fire to-

night. Mem gittin' mindful. That whuppin' a-workin' before he gits it."

"Mem didn't strike no fire," Meg corrected his master. "I strike dat fire."

Meg helped Hammond take off his coat. Then Hammond sat in a low chair before the fire and unbuttoned his shirt while the boy knelt and removed his pants and then his drawers. Meg stroked the hair on Hammond's legs and leaned over to place his face between Hammond's legs, one cheek resting on each thigh.

"Whut you doin', nigger? Whut you mean?"

"Jest a-smellin', Masta, suh. White meat is sho' purty, an' hairs on your legs sho' purty an' soft. An' you smells right elegant. Umm! Umm!"

"I needs washin', why I smells so." Hammond leaned forward for the boy to pull his shirt and undershirt over his head.

"I not musky, no suh, Masta, suh," Meg boasted.

"Then I reckon you no nigger."

"Hones', I ain't got no musk. I soaked in red water today after Alph got out of the tub in the kitchen. Wants to smell me?"

"I smells you without wantin' to. You cain't he'p it. Your musk ain't too powerful," Hammond qualified.

"I soaks myself longer tomorrer, gits me ridden of all that musk."

"Why? All niggers give out musk—'specially bucks. You gittin' big enough to stink some. Cain't he'p it."

"I don' want to be no musky nigger. Mayhap, an' I doesn't stink, you'll let me sleep in bed with you when Dite's belly git too big fer you to pester her, Masta, suh, huh?"

"Whut you know about Dite's belly? Reckon I don' want no stinkin' buck in my bed. Whut fer you guess I want you there? Whut you think I do to you?"

"Mayhap you put your knee agin my belly an' dreen out the stiffenin'—like Ol' Masta doin' to Alph. I knows I could dreen that stiffenin', Masta, suh."

"Then your knee be stiff."

"Yas, suh," Meg conceded. "But that don' make no difference. I jest a nigger."

"But you my nigger. I don't want no crippled nigger," Hammond chaffed.

"I your nigger, Masta."

Hammond knelt on Dite's pallet to pray and Meg knelt beside him and listened. The boy resisted an impulse to lay his arm about the master's midriff. The allure of the copious gold hair was as intense as the attraction of the pink flesh out of which it grew. When Hammond arose from his knee and crawled upon the bed, Meg was aware of the girl lying beside him. He looked with abhorrence at her face upon the pillow, and hatred took possession of him. He desired not merely to kill Dite but to annihilate her. He wished that she had never been born, better yet that she had been born black

and ugly, at very least that she were out in the quarters and not beside her master in his bed.

Meg pinched out the light of the candle and, finding no excuse to remain, went out of the room and closed the door. He spread himself out on the carpet in the hall as close as he could get to the door. He listened and with anguish heard movements, a slight creaking of the bed, a flutter of quilts. He had only a vague imagining of what was going on underneath those covers, but he knew that whatever it was, it was pleasurable. Only when he heard Dite getting out of the bed to sleep on the pallet was Meg reconciled to sleep.

Hammond lay awake weaving fantasies about his projected journey in search of a wife, which he was by no means certain he wanted. The errantry would be pleasant, even if its objective was dubious. It would offer a respite from the responsibilities and the round of daily duties. He was in a state of somnolence between waking and sleeping when he heard a low voiced altercation in the hall.

"Git out o' here, nigger. Your mammy waitin' fer you. You cain't sleep here. This my place." It was Memnon's voice.

"No, suh, nigger; I goin' to sleep right here by my masta's doo'. Don' talk so loud; you wake Masta Ham, he be mad," Meg whispered. "I Masta Ham's nigger."

"You isn't nobody's nigger. You ain't hardly no more'n a sucker."

"I is too Masta's nigger."

"Masta Ham jest a-coddin' you, lettin' you make like bein' his nigger. Now, go down to the kitchen an' let me go asleep."

There was a sound of scuffling and the impact of flesh on flesh. A whining cry followed. It sounded as if it came from Memnon, but it must have been he who had slapped the child. Hammond's anger at being aroused was aggravated by the attack of the adult Negro upon the child. He leapt from his bed and made his way to the door.

"Whut you mean, you scoun'rel, woppin' my little buck?" he demanded of the dark where he could just distinguish moving figures. "Now git outn here and keep quiet."

"I never hit him. He wopped me right in my mouf, Masta, suh," Mem pouted.

"Never mind. Let Meg alone. Come mornin', I goin' to whup you both."

"I never done nothin'," argued Mem and Meg kept silence.

"Git outn here and stop your bellerin'. Meg, you lay down and go to sleep." Hammond closed the door and crawled back into his bed.

Dawn had hardly broken when Hammond was awakened by a small figure in front of the fireplace. Ham stretched and yawned.

"Wants your wench?" suggested Meg, kicking Dite with his bare foot. "Wake up, nigger. Masta crave you in his bed. Ain't know nuffin?"

"Min' your business, Meg. I wants Dite, I gits her. I don' feel like no wench this morning."

"Yas, suh, Masta," and Meg resumed his squatting position before the fire, coaxing it to flare. He continued so, long after the flames were bursting brightly from the wood, adjusting the chunks across the dog-irons and readjusting them, killing time until the room should warm up and his master should see fit to arise. Dite got up, put on her dress and left the room without a word.

Hammond emerged from the bed, sat on the side of it, rubbed and scratched himself, and picked his nose. "Pile plenty chunks on. Keep 'is room hot. I goin' to wash after breakfas'," he admonished.

"Yas, suh," answered Meg, kneeling in front of his master and holding his long drawers for him to slip his legs into. A facility, a dexterity in adjusting his master's garments seemed to be a part of the boy's nature, since nobody had taught him a valet's duties. He dressed his master as if he were dressing a baby, tenderly, carefully.

Memnon was in the habit of producing Hammond's garments one by one, but, except for the boots, Hammond put them on himself, to which even his stiff knee offered no impediment. He was languid from the warmth of the room this morning, however, and made no resistance to Meg's ministrations, to the alacrity and nimbleness of which he paid little heed.

There remained but to hold his master's coat, when the boy, with all the celerity with which he had dressed his master, doffed the only two garments he wore. Out of an apparent nowhere he fetched the leather paddle, newly oiled and flexible, and pressed its handle into Hammond's hand, after which he kneeled sidewise in front of him, his rounded posterior protruding and presenting itself as a target.

Hammond suddenly found himself holding the paddle above the bare buttocks of the boy. "Whut this?" he demanded.

"You say, come mornin', you goin' to whup me 'cause I made noise. You say; you promise."

"Stan' up," the master ordered. Anger took hold of him—anger at the slave's stupidity in accepting his idle threat as a literal promise, anger at being the slave of a slave, at being coerced into flogging the child who had committed no offense, anger at the boy's fatuousness in his inviting chastisement he might have avoided.

The boy got up with all the simian agility with which he had got down. A moment longer and Hammond's wrath would have dissolved. Three resounding blows from the master's hand caught Meg across the face, staggering him one way and then the other. The surprise was as great as the pain, and Meg stepped backward, rubbed his cheek with his hand, and a solemn, hurt expression of shock was followed by a wrinkling of the muscles as if to cry.

Before the tears had time to well, however, the smart subsided and Meg

realized what had occurred. His master had exercised his authority over him, arbitrary, infallible and god-like. Meg was instantly beatified. "I likes that," he murmured.

With the venting of his anger, Hammond turned contrite. "Likes it?"

"Yas, suh, Masta. I your nigger." At last Meg was sure.

Hammond encircled the small Negro with his arm. "Plague on, you makes me mad," he explained. "I knows when I wants to whup you. Don' go makin' me whup you when you doesn't need none."

"But I still your nigger?" Meg begged for reiteration.

"You sho' my nigga!" the master gave his assurance.

Meg felt secure, secure enough to reach up and plant a kiss in the stubble of his master's beard.

Hammond erased the kiss with the palm of his hand. "Don't do that. Don't never do that. You ain't no wench," he explained. "You a buck."

Breakfast was hardly finished when Meg announced, "Your tub ready, Masta, suh. Water all carried."

"Whut water?" asked Hammond.

"Water fer you to wash."

"All right. Run along an' eat. Mem ready to wash me?"

Meg put his arm before his eyes and began to cry silently as he slowly walked toward the door.

"Whut a matter, nigger? Whut you cry about?" Hammond was baffled.

"I wan's to wash you, Masta, suh. Memnon gits to do ever'thing. I not your nigger at all," Meg cried overtly.

"You too little," declared the master.

"Kin do better'n Memnon."

"Aw right, aw right. You kin wash me," Hammond promised.

"You lettin' that nigger boss you. He be ownin' you, first you knows," objected the elder Maxwell.

"He right. He better'n Mem. He little, but let him try," Hammond placed his hand on the boy's shoulder, and said, "He my nigger you know, Papa." Meg looked at him with the pleased solemnity of a prime minister.

When Hammond returned to his room, before the fire stood a washtub half filled with water from which arose small wisps of steam. A metal pail of water, with which to temper the heat of that in the tub, was on the fire. Towels were laid out on the bed. An irregular piece of homemade soap was on the floor. Fresh underclothing, socks and shirt were methodically arranged upon a chair.

Meg piled another knot of wood upon the fire, lest the warm room should cool off. He slipped his master's clothes from him as deftly as he had put them on.

Hammond's knee precluded his squatting in the water. It was necessary for him to sit in it, letting his legs protrude. Meg supported him with his whole strength as Hammond eased himself into the tub. Then the boy got

down on his knees and soaped his master's body, crawling around the tub from Hammond's shoulders to his knees and legs and feet. Meg splashed himself wet and splashed the carpet in rinsing the lather away.

He struggled to help Hammond rise, dripping, to his feet, sopped the water from him with a towel, and led him to the bed where the master lay and was rubbed with a dry towel warmed before the fire. He failed to feel the boy's lips on his feet when Meg buried his face in the towel and kissed them. Not fear of punishment, which he could have endured, but of censure, which he could not stand, restrained the boy from his impulse to kiss, even to bite, other parts. His passion could be appeased only by consuming or being consumed by his master, by becoming a part of him. Comfortably enervated by the exertions of taking his bath and by the friction of the towels, Hammond was insensible to Meg's perturbation.

Meg got the clean drawers and held them open for Ham to insert his legs.

"Not yet," the master murmured. "I wants to res' awhile."

Meg placed the drawers back on the chair. "Masta, please, suh, I craves to wash in your water. Kin I?"

"Yes, go ahead."

"An wipe on your towel?"

"If it's dry enough." Hammond shoved his feet and calves beneath the covers of the bed and lay watching the boy splash in the water in which he himself had bathed. He envied Meg the suppleness of his contortions to immerse himself in the half-filled tub and the litheness with which he applied the towel to his extremities. To Hammond this desire of Meg's to bathe in the water used by him and to use the same towel, this passion of the slave to identify himself with the master through contact with what the master had used, adumbrated but faintly the devotion with which he was served. Hammond felt for it a mild disgust mingled with tolerance and amusement. It is well that no feeling of compassion beset him, else he could not have endured the relationship.

Hammond shoved his legs into his long drawers and submitted to being dressed. He felt refreshed, renovated, clean. Meg slipped himself into his damp garments, buttoning the shirt askew in his haste to accompany his master down the stairs. He ran to the kitchen and, without waiting for help, mixed a toddy, which he carried to Hammond in the sitting room. He stoked and replenished the fire, and drew a low rocker in front of it, brushing its upholstery in an unspoken invitation.

"Nigger tryin' to tell me whure I kin set down," Hammond commented to his father.

"I tol' you that you be his nigger first thing, an' you give him his head. Plagued if I don't reckon but he got more gumption than you, a white man washin' hisself right dab in winter."

CHAPTER 8

HAMMOND was restless in the afternoon. There was no work that required doing. He thought of riding to Benson, but the roads were wretched and there would be nobody in the tavern, unless perhaps Brownlee had been delayed by the mire, and Ham had no desire ever to see Brownlee again. To sit by the fire and drink toddies with his father would be to rehash again plans already formulated and recollections of trivialities best forgotten.

As a relief from ennui, Hammond would with gusto have undertaken the unrelished task of giving Memnon his whipping, but the day was Sunday. For the Maxwells, Sunday was not a day of devotion but a day of rest, to which the servants looked forward. A few of the older slaves, purchased from plantations where there had been religious services, might still recall some of the customs of their youth and say Sunday prayers in their cabins. The Maxwells didn't know. They did not object to religion in the quarters, but they did not encourage it. They did object to their Negroes learning to read. Besides being against the law for slaves, it gave them ideas they were safer, and, for that matter, happier without. At Falconhurst, no Biblical justification of the institution of slavery was required. Nobody disputed it. No admonition of servants to obey masters was needed. Why suggest to them that there exists an alternative?

Maxwell, by ignoring God, avoided the necessity to dispute authority with Him. Why introduce into plantation economy a being superior to the white master?

Hammond ordered his horse and rode over the plantation. He found the river falling and the dangers of overflow past. The horse picked its way upstream to where Saint Helens Creek emptied into the Tombigbee. Ham noted three of his young Negroes fishing with hooks and lines, reined up his horse to talk to them. They had caught four small catfish, but the current was too swift and the sunshine too pale for good fishing.

One of the Negroes had stepped on a moccasin with his bare foot, but the snake had slithered into the water without trying to bite him. Hammond warned the boy to be more careful. His father had paid six hundred dollars for that boy four years ago, and the bite of a moccasin might have killed him.

A deer crossed Hammond's path, a pregnant doe, and disappeared in the brush. Later he saw a wildcat with two kittens playing on a log. He drew his pistol and shot at the mother, but was sure he missed her. He saw innumerable quail and some jacksnipes. The horse shied at a rattlesnake, sufficiently disturbed to coil in alarm. Wild life was so copious on the Maxwell property that it failed to excite Hammond's interest. Lean swine, turned out to earn their own keep, scurried away like wild things. Passing an un-

cleared copse, Hammond smelled the emanations from a skunk, but the offender had disappeared.

He rode back across the fields he intended for cotton but found them too sodden for plowing, as he knew they would be. He was impatient to get to that work, which could not be undertaken for another month.

There was little to interest Hammond in the ride he had taken. What he had seen had been too familiar for interest. He returned to the stable and gave the horse to a hand with instructions about cleaning and currying it. Meg had seen him set out and was waiting at the stable for his return.

"A toddy, Masta? Kin I stir you a toddy, suh?" the urchin begged, following his master toward the house.

"I reckon so," replied Hammond, bored and impatient for something to do.

He saw Big Pearl crossing the open space between the cabins, balancing a bucket of water on her head. She was as lithe and graceful in her way as the blacksnake that had scurried across his path down by the river. Big Pearl saw Hammond too, and, embarrassed by Doc Redfield's diagnosis of her ailment, hurried forward to avoid a direct meeting.

But he called to her and asked, "All right agin, Big Pearl?"

She couldn't hang her head lest she spill the water, and the earth refused to open and swallow her. She could only answer, "Yas, suh, Masta, I's well. Didn't nothin' ail me, I reckon, nothin' but jest bellyache."

"Lucy in the cabin?"

"Yassum, she'm to home," Big Pearl was reluctant to have her master and her mother discuss her illness, which she knew was his intention, but there was no way to prevent the discussion.

Hammond turned toward the cabin. Meg would have followed him, but the master wouldn't permit it. He told him to go to the house and stir his toddy. Belshazzar adjourned his hopscotch before the door to follow his master into the cabin where Lucy was picking over fresh, wild greens, the first of the season, she had gathered for supper. Meat was in a pot on the fire.

"Evenin', Masta, suh. Come right in. Come right in. Evenin', suh. Bel, you git your triflin' self out'n here. Cain't you see Masta come? Let me move that kittle offn the cheer sosan you kin set down." Lucy was flustered at the honor of a visit from her young master. She grabbed a broomstick and began poking nervously at the fire.

"Evenin', Lucy. Big Pearl all right agin?"

"Wasn't nuffin, wasn't nuffin at all," Lucy disparaged. "Jest tomfoolery, I reckon. Wenches gits that way."

"Big Pearl craves I should pleasure her?" Hammond asked without his embarrassment being noticed.

"She sho' do. She sho' do. You isn't goin' to, is you?" Lucy couldn't credit her fortune.

"And you thinks I had ought to?"

"An' you craves to, I be mighty 'bliged. Big Pearl gittin' mighty big to go without bein' pestered. I reckoned I have to crave your leave fer Big Pearl to take up with one of these triflin' bucks. Of course, Big Pearl craves her master."

"Well, git her ready. Wash her good—all over."

"Sho' will scrub that wench, Masta, suh."

"And put some red stuff in the water that you gits from Lucretia Borgia. She tell you how."

"Red stuff?" Lucy failed to understand.

"To kill the musk. Big Pearl powerful musky."

"Sho' is. An' then I sends her over to you at the big house?"

"Nev' mind. I comes back here in little while."

Big Pearl's concupiscent flesh crawled with anticipation, but the only thing she could find to say was, "Thankee mam, Masta, suh, thankee, mam."

Hammond left the cabin with a kind of loathing. He flinched at the task he had undertaken, doubtful of his ability to complete it. Would he falter when the time arrived? It would be a shock to his manhood, if he should fail. As a connoisseur of fine animals he was proud of Big Pearl, enjoyed showing her off to white men who appreciated black perfection, liked to exhibit her paces and demonstrate her strength, thrilled to run his hand over her smooth, powerful flanks as if she were a draft filly; but he had never thought of her as human. There was something bestial about the chore. He was being used as a mere service jackass, like a stud nigger. His father expected it of him, the wench would feel cheated of her right, Lucy would lose caste if he neglected the daughter she had preserved so carefully for him, the other Negroes took it for granted as a master's right and, insofar as a master had any obligation to a slave, a master's duty. To omit it would not impair his authority, nor excite contempt, except his own; it would beget only wonder, question. Hammond knew how a master's acts, whether of commission or omission—although he could do no wrong—were watched and remembered by his whole menage.

To futter Big Pearl would dispel his ennui; and, if he were going to do it at all, there was no virtue in postponement.

Hammond was hardly out of Lucy's cabin, when the orgy of preparation for the long anticipated event began. A tub was brought in and Big Pearl and Belshazzar were sent to the well for water, enough of which to bathe the huge girl required three trips for each. There was no time to heat it, since the master would return in "a little while," and Lucy didn't know whether he meant in five minutes or at his leisure, and she had feared to ask. She ran to the kitchen of the big house for soap and the red stuff to kill the musk, and Lucretia Borgia took her deliberate time in getting it for her.

"Hurry up; hurry. Young Masta gwine to rape Big Pearl, an' I got to

git her scrubbed clean," Meg heard Lucy tell his mother. "Hurry up, please, mam, Miz Lucretia Borgia."

Lucretia Borgia feigned an indifference that she didn't feel, and Meg pretended not to hear. His emotions were mixed. There was an ambivalence between his jealousy of Big Pearl and his delight in his master's prowess. But he could say nothing to Hammond about the matter. He longed to be taken into his master's confidence, craved information, yearned to ask questions. Lucretia Borgia never let her eyes wander long from the window through which she watched to see Hammond cross the clearing to the quarters.

Lucy never let her floor get dirty, but to make sure it was clean she set Belshazzar to slopping water over the puncheons as if to scrub them afresh while she devoted herself to Big Pearl's toilet.

When Big Pearl got her feet into the washtub there was little room for the rest of her. If she should sit or squat, the water would slop out. Lucy used a dish-rag-gourd as a sponge, soaping it and scouring Big Pearl's body. Then, since Big Pearl could not be soaked in the permanganate of potash solution, Lucy achieved the same result by repeatedly squeezing her sponge over the girl's shoulders, keeping the body wet.

Big Pearl was too excited to sense the coldness of the water. She listened to Lucy's injunctions and threats without hearing them.

"You ack a lady now. Do everything like Masta Hammon' say—jest like he say—ever'thin'," Lucy instructed her. "Don' you dare ask Masta fer nuffin'—nuffin' at all. Young Masta know whut he want to do to you and know whut he goin' to give you. You not a lady, I thresh you, and Young Masta hang you by the heels and tears the hide right offn you till you raw all over. And don't you let no farts—don't make no difference how good you feels, don't you let no farts. Stinkin' Masta Ham all up. Cain't git all the musk offn you as is, red water or no red water, so don' let no gas out your guts. An' remember to say thankee to Masta Ham. Whether he give you nothin' or not, say thankee. Lots of dreen on Young Masta to rape all you young wenches. Say thankee." Lucy repeated her cautions with variations over and over.

While Big Pearl dried herself, Lucy scurried to Dido's cabin to spread the news and to borrow a quilt. Her excitement was unconcealed. "Dido," she implored, "Let me have your new quilt. Masta Ham gwine to rape Big Pearl right away, an' my quilt dirty. I knows you choice of it, but for Young Masta, an' I knows you let me have it."

"How come Masta Ham let Big Pearl git so monst'ous befo' he pleasure her?" Dido baited the mother, but went to her chest and produced the quilt.

"Young Masta been a-watchin' Big Pearl, wantin' for her to tittie out. He like 'em with plenty tittie. He say Big Pearl right nice."

"Better take along this bolster, too. Yourn 'most ragged," Dido suggested.

Lucy hurried home with the bedclothes, and Dido lost no time in heralding the tidings about the neighborhood, not neglecting to boast that her bedding was better than Lucy's.

Lucy made the bed anew, ordered Belshazzar to empty the tub and to be gone and not to come back until Hammond should come and go. "Masta Ham gwine rape your sister, an' he don' want no nigger stickin' his nose in," she explained to the boy. "You wants me, I be at Dido's."

The bed made and the room in order, Lucy replenished the fire and sat down to wait. She was more nervous than Big Pearl, and as happy.

"You cold?" she asked the naked girl.

"No'um," Big Pearl replied. "Reckon he come?"

"He come. Give him time," said Lucy. "You too hasty. White man take his time," said Lucy, getting up to smooth an imagined wrinkle from the quilt. "Right kind of Dido, borrowin' her new quilt to me. You be careful and don't smear blood all overn it."

"Blood?"

"You bleeds!"

"Does I?" asked Big Pearl in anxious anticipation. "Um, um!"

The mother resumed her seat upon a bench by the fire and looked at her daughter. "You real purty, Big Pearl," was her verdict. "Coarsen you ain't yaller an' you big. Always was big, bigger'n any sucker I ever had—'ceptin that one buck, borned before you, that Ol' Masta Wilson kept fer his own self when Masta Hammond's pappy bought me an' you. He the biggest little nigger I ever seen, but you more trouble to have. He slip right out like an' if he greased; you come upside down, rump first. Like to most killed me. I wonders did Ol' Masta Wilson sell that little buck or is he still at Coign Plantation. Course he big now. He two or three crops older'n you."

"Who pleasured you, Mammy; the first time, I means?" Big Pearl asked.

"My masta, course," replied Lucy candidly. "Ol' Masta Wilson. He gettin' ol'. I speck he dead now, he so ol'. He kind of ol' and feeble like, but he bust me right open afore he had me take up with yo' pappy."

"You reckon Masta Ham let me take up—after he through with me?"

"Prob'ly, prob'ly. As is, you wastin'. Could have a nice sucker a'ready. Prob'ly give you to Big Vulc or some of 'em fer awhile. Vulc a right likely nigger, stylish an all, right bright skinned. Hopes it Vulc. Pole better lookin' but he no good. Lucretia Borgia ain't had no sucker fer goin' on three year now. Pole young an' strong, but he jest ain't got no sap."

"You don' reckon Masta Ham aim to take me into the big house fer his bed wench, does you?" Big Pearl said hopefully.

"Whut foolishment you talk! Masta don' crave no big gyascutus like you fer his bed. He wants 'em light and little, like Dite. Dido say he lookin' at Tense, only she too little yet awhile."

"You says you own self that I purty."

"You purty, but you big and you right dark. Make a good breeder, mayhap, fer Masta. No bed wench. Ain't you satisfy?"

"Yassum."

"Her Young Masta gwine to pleasure her an' she ain't satisfy! Craves to be his bed wench!"

When Hammond emerged from the big house, more eyes were watching him than he suspected. Lucretia Borgia saw him through the kitchen window and grunted with envious jealousy. Meg's jealousy was even greater. He was impelled to ask to go along, but didn't dare. From behind bushes and around cabin corners, black faces peered, and all knew his errand and envied Big Pearl the honor they knew he was about to do her.

Lucy and Big Pearl both rose when they saw the master. He entered the cabin, removed his coat and laid it on a box which served as a table. Unbuckling his holster, and laying his gun beside his coat, he said, "All right, Lucy, you kin go over to Dido's or somers, but watch that door and keep them niggers outn here."

"Big Pearl, you ack like lady, now. Do whut Masta say or he whup you. Dat a good strong broomstick right by fire, and you needs it, Masta."

"Don' you fret, Lucy. Big Pearl ain't goin' to need no broomstick to her."

"Better not; better not need none," threatened Lucy, closing the door behind her.

When Hammond left the cabin, he was at once exhausted and exhilarated. The ordeal had been more difficult but more pleasant than he had expected. He had a sense of duty performed, a mild regret that it was not yet to do. His back tingled with the raking of Big Pearl's powerful fingers through his shirt and his shoulder pained from her bite.

When Lucy returned she found Big Pearl still on the bed weeping and laughing.

"Whut you cryin' fer, nigger. Masta Ham hurt?"

"No'um, no'um. Masta Ham awful nice. I jest loves Masta Ham."

"He have to whup you?"

"No'um, no'um. Masta never whup me once. Masta Ham sho' is kin' white man."

"I tol' you not to mess blood all over that quilt. Whut will Dido say? Blood smeared all over. And whut that yaller spot?"

"Dat am dirt offn Masta Ham, Masta's boot," said the girl, grateful for something for which she could not be blamed.

"Dat ain't nothin'. Brush right off or wash right out. But I goin' to whup you fer that blood, sure as you born. Masta Ham say about you takin' up?"

"Didn't say nothin'. Mayhap he goin' to crave me for his bed wench," Big Pearl speculated.

"Mayhap he don'. Mayhap he goin' to give you to one of the niggers and raise him a sucker outn you."

Hammond had no fear of his father's disapproval; rather, he feared the chuckle of his approbation. He decided to postpone the narration of his exploit, to draw the sting from the old man's triumph by passing the incident off as a plantation routine when the father should eventually learn of it. But he reckoned without Negro gossip. Lucretia Borgia and Agamemnon had both blabbed to Maxwell, who had already noticed Meg's restless perturbation, which he attributed to a scolding or switching which Hammond had probably given the urchin.

The father was taking the final swallows from his glass when the son entered the room. "Memnon," he called. "Better drink a toddy, Son. Do you good."

But without waiting for Memnon to answer, Meg slipped a hot glass into Hammond's hand.

"Now, stir one fer your masta. Musn't never give me nothin' 'thout givin' some to your masta, your ol' masta," Hammond explained.

Hammond held his drink in his hand, letting it cool, but by the time Meg returned with Maxwell's drink, Hammond was sipping at his own. "This too strong, boy, too much corn," he complained. "Taste."

Meg took the glass, looked at it and then at Hammond. "Right outn yo' glass?" he asked, incredulous.

"Taste it," Hammond said again.

Meg raised the goblet dubiously to his lips. He never had liked the smell of the concoction, and the flavor he relished even less. He had been told to taste, however, and he took three small swallows before Hammond grabbed it from his hand. "I tol' you to taste," the master reprimanded. "I never tol' you to drink it down. Now fill it up with hot water. Yourn all right, Papa? Not too much corn?"

"Mine good. That saplin' of yourn stirs 'em better'n the big nigger, seem like."

The pleasure that the praise, which he overheard, gave Meg was tempered by the fear of having his services diverted from the son to the father. He was back with Hammond's drink and waited for approval.

"This better. This good," said Hammond.

"Never did like much corn in yo' toddy, Son. Whiskey do you good after your tussle. Big Pearl powerful strong," Maxwell led into the subject.

"She big, all right."

"How you likes black meat?"

"Same as yaller meat, an' you closes your eyes. Reckon white meat ain't no different, 'ceptin' fer musk."

"Jest the same. Jest the same. Right pleased you found out. Tired, Ham?"

"A mite, jest a mite. I feels good."

"Be a-pesterin' Big Pearl regular, first thing," Maxwell predicted.

"Mayhap," admitted Hammond. "Worst thing is havin' to—the first time. Owner, a jackass, seem like; pesters wenches whether he hone to or not."

"All your own doin'. Nobody didn't make you. Niggers cain't make they owner do nothin' he don' want to."

"They expects it, howsumever, kind of. You says so your own self. A good masta has to pleasure 'em. If'n he kin, that is. An' I kin."

"An' you kin, an' you wants to, it a good thing. Makes 'em feel you takin' an in'erest in 'em. Makes 'em feel they belong to you. Even bucks sets more store in a wench that her masta has pestered. I wisht you enjoyed it more."

"I doesn't disenjoy it. Oft times I likes it right well. Take this Big Pearl now, she dark and she big, but she right hearty."

"I could do it yet, but fer my rheumatiz. Mayhap, I goin' to git shet of that, an'—" Maxwell didn't finish his sentence, nor need to.

Meg delayed his inquisition until bedtime, doubted even then that Hammond would submit to be questioned. "You pleasure Big Pearl this evening, Masta Ham?" he asked, struggling to withdraw Hammond's pants from his legs.

"Shut your black mouf," adjured the white man. "None o' your business." He knew that the question was purely rhetorical. "Why you wants to know?"

"Will you pleasure me sometime, Masta,—when I gits a little bigger?"

"How kin I pleasure you? You a buck. Ain't no way to pleasure a buck. Stop talkin' trash."

"I purtier than Big Pearl. I little an' I yaller. I real purty, Masta," Meg protested.

"You skinny. Besides, I tells you, you a buck."

"An' I a wench, would you pleasure me, please, suh, Masta?"

"Reckon I would, mayhap, an' you a wench. An' you hipped out an' grew nice, big breastes, I would. But you ain't agoin' to. You a buck."

Meg sighed, "I wishes I was a wench."

"You ain't, and it don't do you no good to hanker," Hammond was not amused and sought to dismiss the subject.

The boy reopened it. "You reckon," he asked, "Masta Doc Redfield could cut me an' turn me into a wench?"

"You knows he couldn't. A gelding ain't a mare, is he?"

"Naw, sir."

"An' a steer ain't a cow, is he? Ain't got no tits. An' a barrow ain't a sow?"

"Naw, sir."

"An' a gentled nigger ain't a wench. Now, stop your talkin' trash and git outn that door an' go asleep."

"Yas, suh, Masta." Meg knew Ham was provoked.

"An', what's more, I ketch you tryin' to gentle yourself, I rips the hide right offn your bottom, ever' smidgen of it. I wants you jest like you is, a buck nigger."

CHAPTER 9

"GO DOWN to the river and wash yourself good all over, and come to me at the stable," Hammond dispassionately instructed Memnon the following morning at breakfast.

Memnon began to whimper, "Masta goin' to whup Memnon. Don' whup Mem, Masta, suh, please, suh. Mem good and ever'thin'. Mem spry. Mem sick, Masta. Cain't whup a sick nigger, Masta."

"I said wash an' meet me. I never said about whuppin'."

Ham usually omitted his toddy after breakfast, but this morning he felt a need for one. Meg prepared the drinks, one for each of his masters, before he sat down to his own breakfast in the kitchen with Alph. He ate hurriedly and nervously. He feared Hammond might go to the stable without him.

He stood outside the door with the leather paddle in his hand when Hammond came out.

"Give it here," commanded Ham.

"But, I goin' along," protested the boy doubtfully.

"Who said?"

"You said," affirmed Meg. "I'm goin' to rub the stuff—the—. You said I could."

"The *pimentade?* Well, come along. I reckon I did say."

The first adult buck they met was Napoleon, who had been supplanted in Lucretia Borgia's affections by the more fertile Mem. He was a stout yellow boy somewhat more than Hammond's own age, all of nineteen, possibly twenty.

"Come along, Pole; I needs you," Hammond said.

Pole saw the paddle and began to protest, "Don' whup me, Masta. I ain't done nothin', Masta?" His inflection made his affirmation a question.

"Don't fret yourself. Ain't minded to trounce you, Pole."

"Goin' to hide Memnon. I goin' to rub the stuff." Meg elucidated.

"Not, an' you cain't keep your mouth shutten," warned Hammond. He was preoccupied, reluctant of the task in front of him. He ran his eyes over Pole, however, in contemplation of the price he would bring the following fall in New Orleans—fifteen to eighteen hundred dollars, possibly two thousand if the demand for Negroes continued to grow. Pole was a lazy lummox, and not very alert, just bright enough to get out of work and to avoid punishment. However, he was a husky, upstanding, well proportioned boy with good, almost pretty features, and an active dimple; his shortcomings would not cheapen him. Hammond noted that Pole was soft, his muscles flaccid; it was none too early to begin to prime him.

The double doors of the stable stood open, and blue bottle flies buzzed in the sunshine. A surrey and a gig stood with shafts upraised in the shadows

of the cavernous interior. The corners of the main room held cobwebs in which pieces of hay, dust and other debris rested lightly. Hammond noticed that some little-used harness, hanging on the wall, was dusty and in need of oil.

The puncheons, running crosswise of the floor, were worn with the traffic of the years, and the cracks between them were filled with dirt. The studding which supported the building was warped with the top-heavy weight of hay in the loft and was no longer quite plumb, if it had ever been. Scabrous patches of whitewash still adhered to the walls near the ceiling, but they were gray from the accumulations of dust.

Hammond's stallion nickered for attention when he caught his odor, and Hammond went back to the stall to rub the horse's nose. The mares and mules in the box stalls behind the stallion ignored Hammond's presence, although the sounds of their switchings and stampings and mumbling made their presence known. The doors of the other box stalls, which served as dormitories for young bucks, stood open.

"Drive them niggers outn this barn and tell 'em be gone clean away from here," Hammond instructed Pole. "Look in the stalls, and clean 'em all out, ever' one on 'em. Whure that Mem nigger? Reckon he don' crave no touchin' up, here and there? Reckon he hidin' out?"

"Here come Mem, now, Masta, suh. Here he come," Meg announced from outside the building.

Assorted in all stages of adolescence, Negro boys, black, brown, ochre, and all but white, squat and tall, fat and lathy, scurried, sauntered or sidled past their master in their exits from the building. One ugly, gangling pubescent had kinky hair of a brown bordering upon rufus, gray eyes, and a saffron face spattered with freckles. Hammond ignored their passing, but this unpleasant combination attracted his attention and he made a note to sell him. It didn't pay to feed and mature an animal so hideous, even though he might be sound. Why hadn't he thought to offer the little buck to Brownlee? What was such trash doing at Falconhurst anyway?

Memnon moped into the doorway.

"Whure you been? I tol' you to wash an' come here?" Hammond greeted him.

"Been a-washin', like you say—all over, good. Masta, I sick. I don' crave whuppin' at all. Mem don' need whuppin', Masta, please, suh, please suh. Masta, I sick-like. I got a misery right in my guts."

"Pole goin' to jar that misery right outn you. Jes' you wait. Shuck down."

"That rope right wore out. Reckon it will hold?" Hammond addressed himself; and then said to Napoleon, "Put it through that off pulley."

Pole got on a box and inserted the rope into the end pulley of a series affixed, about a foot and a half apart, to the center beam in the ceiling.

"Yon isn't goin' to hang me up, Mista? I kneel down good, I ben' over, I hol' still, an' you doesn't hang me. Masta. Masta, suh, don't hang Mem.

Don' please." The now naked Negro was terrified.

"That pulley stick. It won' turn," said Pole.

"Not used in long time," said Ham. "Pick the dirt outn it and grease it. Goin' to use the two end ones and stretch him."

"Don' stretch me that fur, Masta. My legs won' reach that fur. Use a middle pulley, Masta, please."

"Mem git out that jug of *pimentade* and the crock and sponge. You put it away last time it was used in that little corner room."

"You ain't goin' to *pimentade* me, Masta, too? That burn awful. Oh, Masta, Masta, please, no *pimentade.*" Memnon wept, but got the dust-incrusted jug and went back for the crock, which held the dish-rag-gourd sponge over which had settled dust mixed with fine webs. He set them gingerly down on the floor beside the box on which his master sat.

Pole had cleaned and oiled the pulley until it functioned with a whining squeak.

Meg attacked the jug of *pimentade,* struggled with the corncob which served as a stopper and finally extracted it with his teeth. He began pouring the liquid over the soiled sponge in the crock until Hammond checked him.

"Don't pour that yet. Shake the jug first. Stir up the pepper that settles to the bottom," he instructed Meg.

The jug was too heavy for the boy to manage and Hammond lifted it and shook it himself. Meg, however, tipped it and gurgled its contents into the crock, such as he didn't spill on the floor. He soaked the gourd and wrung the liquid out of it and soaked it again. He held the saturated sponge before him ready when it should be needed, oblivious of the sticky mixture that dripped down the front of his clothes.

"Close them doors, Meg," Hammond ordered. "Don't want them bucks hangin' around to hear this paddle slappin'. Scare 'em till they green."

Gloom and dusk settled over the great room with the shutting out of the sunlight that had poured through the wide doors.

"Now lay down," Hammond commanded Mem. "No, on your back and closer this way." He formed a loop in the end of the rope and drew it tight around Mem's ankle. "Now, Pole, you pull."

Memnon stopped protesting. He clambered along the floor with his hands and arms in an effort to protect his back from the roughness of the floor as Napoleon on the other end of the rope hoisted him in the air. His fingers could just reach the floor and relieve a small part of the tension on his foot when Hammond called to Pole, "That's enough. Tie it."

The boy hung upside down by one foot, the other threshing the air. His pleas had degenerated into a mere, "Masta. Please, suh, Masta," which Hammond ignored.

Pole stood on a box and thrust another rope through the pulley farthest from Mem. Hammond looped it around Mem's other foot and Pole pulled

it and tied it, thus spraddling Mem's legs to the greatest width it was possible to open them.

Hammond grabbed Mem around the waist and added his weight on the ropes. "Reckon they strong enough," he commented, "even and he cavort some."

"Oh, oh, my foot hurt. Oh, oh, Masta," Memnon screamed, but Hammond wadded up his bandana and, stuffing it into Mem's mouth, stifled his noise. Memnon could have removed it, but he was glad enough of the gag. His cries were involuntary.

"He sure look funny, a-hangin'. Wisht Miz Lucretia Borgia see him now," said Napoleon.

"Tell me when to rub on the *pimentade,*" said Meg.

"You wait. Got to larrup him first. I'll tell you when," said Hammond, and he beckoned to Pole, who came forward and waited.

Hammond ran his hands over Mem's thighs and buttocks, and found them soft. He had known that they would not be firm, for Mem did no hard work. He felt of the belly which offered no resistance to his grasp.

He put the paddle in Pole's hand and instructed him, "Now, stand off from him, so like. An' aim fer his bottom. Gits it down on his legs, it won't hurt none, but don't slam his back. An' stay away from the front side. Don't hit him in the belly or on the nuts. Un'erstan'?"

"Yas, suh, Masta; I reckons I does."

"I'll tell you when to start an' stop you when I ready fer you to stop." Hammond retired to a box against the wall. He didn't feel just well. "Go ahead," he gave the word.

Pole took his stance and raised his paddle, measuring the distance from his target. He tried to conceal his exultation, but couldn't control the play of his dimple. He tapped Mem's rump lightly, hardly touching it. Then three sharp spats which caused the pendent body to sway only slightly. Mem's groans were audible, but he was unable to cry out.

"Ain't you no stronger, Pole?" demanded Hammond. "Meg here could do it that good. Have to call a stronger nigger."

"I strong, Masta," Pole replied. "Jest a-feelin' my way, kind of. Jist a-reachin' fer my mark."

"You ain't a-pettin' a baby: you's a-whuppin' a nigger."

The next blow set Mem swinging and begot a moan that the handkerchief in his mouth couldn't stifle. Thereafter the paddle fell at regular intervals, slowly but steadily, a blow followed by a wait until the victim came to rest, and another blow. The impact of the heavy leather upon the flaccid flesh produced a dull sound as if the meat were inanimate and were unsupported by a skeleton. Muffled sounds, incomprehensible and distorted, got past the handkerchief. Mem's body writhed and he took his fingers from the floor and flailed his arms. Once, only once, he threw his hands behind him to shield his buttocks and caught the blow on his knuckles.

There were small abrasions from the first dozen blows of the paddle, but the integument held. At length the bruised flesh spattered through the holes in the paddle with a spurt of blood. Hammond's queasiness turned to nausea. He told Pole to wait. He went out and closed the door behind him.

Mem's swinging body came to absolute rest. The swaying weight had stretched the ropes so much that Mem could reach the floor with his palms and relieve the tension on his ankles. He raised his hands, one at a time, to feel of his bruised and bloody fundament.

Pole guffawed, "Nigger, 'Cretia Borgia had ought to see you now. Reckon you not much good to Lucretia Borgia, now, never goin' be no good agin. You sure a purty sight with the blood a-drippiu' outn you. Goin' to be purtier when Masta come back. Wait and see whut he do to you. He ain't a-goin' to kill you, that sure. But he goin' to make a good nigger outn you, a good nigger. A good nigger."

Mem's mouth writhed in an effort to reply, but Pole could not interpret the sounds that came out of it.

Hammond came back into the barn, the color gone from his face. He had emptied his stomach and felt better. "Better give him some more," he said stoically and sat on the box.

Pole resumed his pommeling. The respite increased the pain. In the interval the bruised flesh had begun to grow sore. Hammond was impelled to stop the blows, but couldn't. If he had not sickened he would have commanded Napoleon to desist, but he was ashamed of his weakness. He had to prove his ruthlessness, which he thought of as his courage. He had to prove to himself that he could whip a nigger. As soon as he dared, he put a stop to the beating. Pole rested the end of the bat on the floor; Hammond took it from his hand and hung it on a nail in the wall.

Meg had stared at the whipping, transfixed, enraptured. He harbored no hatred for Memnon, but this was a nigger's condign fate, a concept he had acquired from Lucretia Borgia, who was sycophant enough to avoid punishment but ready to submit to it if it should be her master's whim. But for the grace of Hammond, it was Meg's own bottom that hung there bruised and raw. Meg enjoyed Mem's ignominy from the vicarious beating by Pole and thought of the exquisite, the ecstatic pain of the impact of the paddle in Hammond's own hands. He had, indeed, aspired to such a martyrdom, but had not envisioned that his master might delegate the task to another slave. It sobered him. He resolved to evade chastisement which he had before invited.

"All right. Go to work," Hammond nodded toward Meg. He was serious; except that this was duty, he was contrite. He sensed Mem's agony and terror. He imagined the furious smarting the application of the *pimentade* would beget; and he would have withheld it but for his faith in its power to heal. He was not wanton, but, having caused the injury, he must heal it.

Meg had to reach up to apply the sponge, and when he squeezed it, as

much of its liquid ran down his arm as on Mem's injuries. Mem writhed at the excruciating burn of the acrid mixture and tried to scream. Hammond himself untied the ropes, lowering Mem to a position on his shoulders, so that Meg had to stoop somewhat rather than to reach upward. Mem's head was forward, but he changed his position so that his left cheek was on the floor. He had chewed the handkerchief into a wet wad and spat it out without volition. He could have removed it with his hand, but was glad enough to have his cries silenced.

Meg returned from the crock with another spongeful of *pimentade* which he sopped over Memnon's posterior. Mem bellowed with the smart, "Ow-ow-w-w,—please, Masta. That enough, Masta. Ow-ow-w-w." He grasped Meg's ankles, the only things within his reach. He had to have something to hold to. His cries subsided into suspirations. "Please, suh, Masta, suh," he murmured without meaning. The sticky *pimentade* gravitated down his back and mingled with the blood that streaked it; it ran into the wool of his head and trickled across his cheek.

Hammond told Pole to release the ropes and let Mem down. Meg kicked himself loose from Memnon's hold on his ankles and ran to the crock to sop up the last dirty dregs of the *pimentade* into which the capsicum had settled. Pole untied one rope and released a leg, and Mem's face dragged slowly along the floor as the weight on the other rope brought it vertical. The free leg flailed weakly as Meg returned to squeeze the final charge of *pimentade* over Mem, who had lost his sensibility and failed to writhe at the sponge's friction. Pole released the second rope and Mem's body fell on its back to the floor. He was too exhausted, too weary, too relieved to turn on his belly. He made no effort to extricate his ankles from the slackened ropes.

Hammond opened one of the doors and Meg pushed back the other. Light flooded the barn and the line of the sun fell diagonally across Mem's body, his head in its buttery warmth, his legs in the shade.

Hammond didn't stop but turned toward the house. Meg followed him, turning his head backward, reluctant to leave the carnage. They met the elder Maxwell who had started on rheumatic legs toward the stable. He had paced the gallery impatiently until he had heard Mem's scream and could restrain himself no longer.

"How is he?" the father asked.

"He all right—goin' to be."

"Any fuss? Everythin' all right?"

"Ever'thiu' all right," answered Hammond briefly.

"Bleed much?"

"Not much."

"How are you, Son? Had ought to a done it myself."

"I all right, Papa. I tired is all. I reckon I tender. I reckon I wasn't cut out fer threshin' niggers."

"It got to be done—sometimes."

"It got to be done—sometimes," the son echoed.

"Do Memnon good. Needed it."

"Shore did, lyin', and stealin', and slothin' around."

"Better have that boy stir you a toddy, Son."

"Don't want no toddy, Papa. I crave to lay down."

Hammond climbed the stairs, Meg at his heels. He sent the child away, entered his room, threw himself upon the bed face down, and relieved himself in tears.

CHAPTER 10

"WELL, I swan! Warren Maxwell's boy. I'd a-knowed you anywhures. Look jest like yo' papa," said Major Woodford genially. "Beatrix, oh Beatrix, come and see Sophie Hammond's boy. She don't hear me; don't hear right good. She'll be in later. How is your papa?"

"Papa kindly poorly—rheumatiz. But he gittin' better right stiddy—dreening that rheumatiz off into a little buck," replied Hammond.

"Sure is pizen, that rheumatiz. I had it a spell year before last. Arnicie, had my servant rub me right good with arnicie ever' night—that's how I gotten shet of it. Swallowed some inside, too."

"Arnicie? I must remember me and tell Papa."

"Your papa and me got to expect some failin'. We gittin' to that age, seem like. Isn't bound down to his bed, is he?"

"No, no, Papa up and around ever' day, but he cain't walk very fur or very fast and cain't straddle a hoss at all."

"Good overseer?"

"I'm overseer, I reckon. Leastwise, only one we got. Papa don't cotton to overseers, thinks they apt to break down his niggers a-tryin' fer a big crop."

"Apt to. But we got to grow cotton. Only way to keep alive and keep our niggers from starvin'," said the Major.

"Our dirt is niggered out. Don't build hardly no cotton, no matter how hard yon drives the hands," replied Hammond.

"Same here at Crowfoot. The dirt ain't got no more sap left in it. Younger, I'd strike out fer Mississip or Arkansas, or the Texies—git me new land in a new country."

"I'd go tomorrow if Papa didn't need me at Falconhurst so bad," sighed Hammond. "Jest cain't pick up and leave him, rheumatiz and all, howsumever."

"I been a-hearin' he doin' right well at Falconhurst. Folks do say he makin' out right smart," the Major hinted.

"Well, we livin' and puttin' a little by. Doin' tol'able, tol'able."

"An' you in charge. Ain' no more than a boy—seem like. Must be right stiddy."

"I has to be. Ain't nobody else."

"My Dick is older'n you, but I cain't 'pend on him fer nothin'. Got him in Centerville a-readin' law with Judge Bentley. Goin' to make a lawyer outn him, an' if I kin. Ain't good fer nothin' else. Won't take hold. Steals—steals, that is, from me."

"That's bad," admitted Hammond. "But he'll settle, gits older."

"Got to watch my niggers to keep Dick from stealin' 'em to sell fer his gamblin' debts. Got away with two bucks las' year."

"Dick the one that had that billy goat, ain't he?"

"Billy goat?" repeated the Major.

"Yas. When I was little and come here with my mamma to see Cousin Beatrix, boy had a goat hitched up."

"I remember. That was Dick. You recollect that billy goat? Whut a memory. You not more than about six or seven."

"Five. That all I remembered about Crowfoot till I rode up this morning and see the house. Then I remember ever'thin'. Ever'thin' come back."

"You ain't been here in all them years? Guess not. Kindly neglectful, ain't you? Whut do we owe the honor of seein' you now to? You right welcome, mighty welcome, any time. But whut do we owe the honor to?"

"Well, I over in these parts to borrow an old Mandingo buck offn Mista Wilson over at Coign Plantation. Papa got two prime Mandingo wenches, an' he want Mista Wilson's buck to mate up with 'em. Papa Mandingo crazy, seem like. Thinks they no niggers like Mandingos."

"They good, all right. Not many pure ones around. I guess they purty hard to ketch in Africa. Didn't many ever come to America. Plenty in Cuba, folks say, and Jamaica."

"But no way to fetch 'em in."

"Not now. Fool law. I recollect that big buck of Mista Wilson's. Bozal brute, I believe. Extra big and well set up, even fer a Mandingo. Must be old though. Maybe he ain't wore plumb out, an' the wenches is young and spry. Goin' down to Coign to borrow him, eh?"

"An' rode by Crowfoot to call—sorta. You my nighest of kin—that is, Cousin Beatrix is."

"That's right, I reckon. You an' your papa the only Maxwells left. Used to be a big family of 'em; and the Hammonds have sort of petered out—one thing and another, I reckon my wife and children are your nearest blood. Married?"

"Not yet." Hammond blushed.

"Ought to git married. Keep the blood from running out," argued Major Woodford.

"That whut Papa say. I lookin' around. Don't know many white ladies."

"Woods full of 'em, and you kin jest about take your pick. Steady young man, and next in line to heir a good plantation. Quite a ketch, an' I knows anything."

Hammond was ill at ease as he talked. The elegance of the Crowfoot parlor, the ornate American-Empire suite of walnut, the imitation Aubusson carpet, the great square piano with its massive legs, the curtains of yellow damask at the long windows, although they were worn, the muddy portraits in heavy, gilt frames, impressed the boy so much that his diffidence increased. His host, after so many years of living with it, still connted the cost of the house and its furnishings, which he had acquired when cotton crops were good and when his Negroes were young and before it was necessary to mortgage both the plantation and its slaves. His taking Hammond

into the elaborate room had been by design and it had brought about the effect he intended.

The Major rose from the pink sofa and stuffed his thumbs into the pockets of his vest, thus throwing open his tail-coat and revealing the heavy, gold chain with its seals that hung across his well rounded stomach. "Let's go and find Miz Woodford, your Cousin Beatrix that is. She'll shore be right glad. Won't tell her who you air; let her reckon."

He bustled on his short legs, with a show of haste but no haste, toward the sitting room, his hand on the arm of Hammond, limping beside him. They found his wife reading a Bible in which she traced the lines with her forefinger and moved her lips. She failed to notice their approach until they came near to her and started when she saw the unanticipated guest. She looked Hammond up and down and then looked questioningly into the face of the Major, closing her book and raising her ear trumpet with a single gesture.

"Who you reckon this is?" shouted the Major into the funnel-like contraption.

"How?" asked his wife, and he repeated the question even louder.

"A little hard a hearin'," he said in an aside to Hammond.

The woman looked Hammond up and down with what to him appeared like hostility, indifference at best. "I don't know. Should I ought to know? Ain't ever seen him before as I know of," she finally said in a loud voice without resonance, the hollow voice of one who cannot hear his own words.

"Sophie's boy, Hammond—Hammond Maxwell," explained the Major into the horn.

"How? I cain't hear," she said, searching the Major's face. "Don't hear right good," she informed Hammond, as if it were not apparent.

"Hammond. Hammond Maxwell. Your Cousin Sophie's boy," the Major vociferated.

It took a while for the woman to grasp the unexpected information. A smile spread slowly over her face as she rose, dropping the book from her lap. "Well, I declare. Hammond, Cousin Hammond. I'm glad to see you, right glad," she exclaimed, throwing her heavy arms around his shoulders and planting a kiss upon his embarrassed mouth. "Whure did you ever come from?"

"From home," Hammond answered, unnoted.

"I declare!" she said, standing back a step, but keeping a firm grasp on his shoulders with her outstretched hands. "I jest declare! Sophie's boy. I had ought to have knowed, ought to have knowed you anywheres. The very image of Uncle Theo. Ain't he like Uncle Theophilus, Major?"

"More like his pa. Jest like Warren," the Major said in a loud voice, and was forced to repeat it even louder.

Beatrix made a face and shook her head in disagreement. "He's a Hammond, pure Hammond. Ain't nothing Maxwell about him as I kin see. Pull

up a seat and talk," she gestured toward a chair and resumed her own, kicking the Bible aside.

Hammond was disappointed in the study in browns that was his cousin. She was a heavy made woman of indefinite middle age, her dull, dark chestnut hair combed severely back from her sallow, moth-patched face and amber eyes. Her thin upper lip, short and covered with dark down in which no stiff hairs had yet appeared, drew back to reveal wide-spaced teeth which were also brown, and which protruded over her lower jaw. Her brown woolen dress, well stayed, was neat and severe.

She held her instrument in Hammond's direction, but he at first talked around it rather than into it. She picked up only half he said, even after he had repeated, but it made little difference, since she was bent more upon what she herself had to say than upon what Hammond said.

"How'd you leave Cousin Warren?" she asked, and Hammond explained the state of his father's health.

"When did you come?"

"Jest rode in. Slept last night at the tavern in Centerville."

"Too bad. Might as well of found Richard and slept with him. He's in Centerville a-readin' law," she gloated. "Goin' to be a lawyer. Whut are you a-aimin' fer?"

"Don't know. Jest a planter, I reckon," Hammond said.

"Ought to be a lawyer and go into politics, like Richard. Reckon he'll be governor or somethin' someday."

"More likely to turn out a gam'ler or a nigger stealer," interposed Major Woodford in a normal tone.

"Whut say?" his wife turned her horn toward her husband.

"Nothin'," the Major shook his head.

"More 'n likely somethin' about Richard. You got a grudge agin poor Richard. Richard ain't real strong. Got to make allowance. Always did favor Charles. Charles is my second boy," she explained to Hammond.

"Charlie ain't a nigger thief—yet," the Major said in a voice Beatrix couldn't hear.

"Charles is younger 'n you. Richard older 'n you. Sophie had you jest between 'em."

"I know," Hammond shouted.

"And Blanche, Blanche is younger yet. Jest sixteen. She my youngest. Whure is Blanche? She ought to be ready fer church."

"She about ready, I reckon. Prob'ly a-primpin' extry if she know Hammond here," laughed the Major.

"The kerriage ready?" asked Beatrix.

"Will be," the Major nodded toward her. "Ol' Wash is hitchin' it."

"Charles come to go with her?" the mother inquired.

"Cain't count on him. He promised to be back in time, but you cain't never depen' on him. Don't like goin' to church, nohow," said the Major.

"Somebody got to go with Blanche. Cain't have her go alone with jest that nigger coachman," the mother observed.

"Why not? She safe with ol' Wash. He too ol' to do harm," the Major shouted.

"Don't look right. Church would talk," declared Beatrix. "Don't see whut Charles have to go to Centerville to see Richard fer ever' Sat'day, and cain't git home to take Blanche to meetin' on Sunday. Them boys cain't git along together at home."

"To Centerville to see Dick?" Major Woodford scoffed. "Charlie don't care no more 'bout Dick in Centerville than he do at Crowfoot. He go to Centerville to see the nigger fightin' ever' Satiday. That whut he go to see. Jest wild about nigger fightin'."

"You hadn't ought to let him," complained his wife. "Leads to gamblin'. First thing, that boy'll be gamblin', and all your fault."

"Gamblin'. Whut he got to gam'le with? Few dollars pocket money, mayhap. Cain't keep a boy from gam'lin' a little," said the Major with complacence.

"Gamblin' is a sin, jest like dancin' and playin' cards and carryin' on. Brother Ben Jones say so the las' sermon I could hear him preach," she quoted her authority. "I don't go to church no more. Ain't no use. Cain't hear right good, so I jest sets at home and reads the Bible and lets the chil'ren go. Jest as good, I figure. But gamblin's a sin, sure as you born. Don't say nothin' in the Bible about nigger fightin', as I kin read. It is all very good, fer them as craves it, that is, but the gam'lin' shore is bad. Whure they is nigger fightin', there sure to be gam'lin', an' I don't want my boy Charles corrupted. Charles is sich an innocent, good boy, but you'll git him wil' like Richard an' you don' keep him home away from them fights."

"I cain't keep him home withoutn I put him in spancels. Always cravin' I give him a young buck to make a fighter out of. I don't do it, do I? I don't want my hands ruint, chewed up and scarred up and blinded. Give him a nigger to fight, have to have another to bet—maybe lose. You cain't say I aids and abets him in his lowness," the father exculpated himself.

"Charles don't come, whyn't you go to meetin' with Blanche?" the wife suggested. "She bent and determined to go, after dressin' up and all."

"You know, well as I do, I got to go to that nigger meetin'. You know the law that you cain't have no nigger church, 'lessen a white man there to hear that they don't preach no risin'."

"Mayhap, Cousin Hammond would crave to carry Blanche to church meetin'?" Cousin Beatrix suggested.

"Hammond tired," objected her husband. "Ridin' all day yestiday, and up early this morning to git here."

"I not tired hardly. I be right charmed to go, an' I knowed how to ack," volunteered Hammond.

"Ack jest like in any church. We're Babtists."

"Whut I mean, I ain't ben to church sence Mamma die," confessed Hammond.

"Course, you got to stay and look after your nigger meetin'," Beatrix sought an excuse for him. "Jest as good. God sees you in nigger meetin'."

"We don't have nigger church at Falconhurst. Papa think it keeps the hands all stirred up," Hammond explained.

"He right," agreed Woodford. "I'd sell that preacher and stop that foolishness if it wasn't fer her."

"Why, you usen to hold meetin' fer your servants," Beatrix remembered.

"Not sence Mamma die."

"Had a good meetin' house an' everything."

"Use it now to sleep niggers in. Got to be so many," said Hammond.

"Whut the use of slavery an' it ain't to save pore heathen souls, to bring the niggers to Jesus and learn 'em to lay their burdens at His feet? Ain't right, ain't right, I say, to keep 'em from learnin' about the Lord."

"Warren always was a free thinker," the Major sighed in a low voice. "I got to have religion, women about."

"Whut you needin' is a good Christian wife, Cousin Hammond," Beatrix prescribed. "Make you go to church. Save your soul an' bring you to Jesus."

"Whut the matter with that Charles? We late a'ready. He cain't ever do nothin' he promise," complained Blanche as she entered the room, tying her bonnet with ribbons beneath her chin. Seeing Hammond, she stopped short and expressed her surprise with "Oh!"

"Come here, darlin', and kiss your Cousin Hammond, Hammond Maxwell, Cousin Sophie Hammond's boy," her mother bade Blanche. "Ain't seen him sence he was a little tad an' you was a baby. Come to visit us from Falconhurst Plantation. Goin' to carry you to church. Come here an' kiss him welcome."

The girl blushed but was without reluctance. She advanced and the boy encircled her stays and pecked an embarrassed kiss upon her small petulant mouth. "Never knowed I had no cousin like you," she said.

"Jest a second, a second cousin, that is," explained Hammond.

"I hearn Mamma talk about her Cousin Sophie, but I thinkin' she was dead."

"Yes, she dead. She my mamma."

"There's Wash with the team," Major Woodford said, looking out the window. "Better git along, don't want to be late fer the meetin'. Reckon Charlie ain't comin'. We'll talk some when you gits back."

Blanche kissed her mother, who did not rise. The Major led the way through the wide hall to accompany the pair as far as the front gallery where he stood watching Hammond awkwardly hand the girl into the wide back seat of the surrey and get in beside her. The old chocolate-hued coachman, in his dilapidated livery, appraised the newcomer with approval without turning his own head or appearing to look. He noted the affability of his master

and the animation of the girl, and he surmised in them the hope to garner the visitor into the family.

For Hammond, sitting so close to a white girl was a fresh experience. He thought Blanche pretty, beautiful, in fact. He willed to think so. She was indeed fresh and she was young, and her costume emphasized what allure she had. Her flowing dress of cream-colored woolen challis with a painted pattern of small moss roses was held in at the tightly laced waist by a sash of pink ribbon and enveloped her from neck to ankle. Her stays forced her bosom upward and there was a hint of copious and upright breasts beneath the folds of her frock. The wide brim of her flowered hat was bent against the sides of her face by streamers that tied beneath her chin.

What Hammond could see of Blanche herself satisfied his inexperience. He approved the smallness of her mouth and attached some concept of beauty to the shortness of the upper lip, which, unlike her mother's, was not yet covered with down. He thought her small, pinched, adenoidal nose precious. Her light blue eyes he thought divine, although their narrow spacing annoyed him. They were unshaded by her scant pale brows of the same color as her hair. How was Hammond to know that the curls that showed beneath the hat were made with a curling-iron? And how was he to know that the alternate blanching and blushing of her cheek was occasioned by his own presence?

Hammond failed to note the bulbous fingers with the bitten nails that protruded from Blanche's short, fingerless black lace mitts. He was allured by the odor of the girl, a fresh scent, something like rose geranium, and wondered whether all white ladies smelled so sweet. No muskiness.

But he would have to get used to whiteness of female flesh. Its pallor seemed to him not quite healthy, somehow leprous, cold. He knew the beauty of blondness, but failed to appreciate it. He knew, moreover, that if he was to have a wife he would have to tolerate that she was white.

Hammond could only imagine the contours beneath the clothes. If she were a slave he could strip her down and examine her, but since she was white he must merely surmise her structure. Anyway, he feared that he would be repelled by the expanse of white flesh. The idea made him slightly queasy. It was as well that he didn't see it. That she was virgin it would be unfair to doubt; Hammond was ashamed that he had permitted the question to enter his consciousness.

"Folks won't believe that you-all my cousin," observed Blanche.

"Why won't they? I am."

"I knows you are, but I ain't never talked about you, didn't know nothin' about you at all."

"Thought everybody knowed we cousins. I did. Papa been talkin' 'bout you and Cousin Beatrix ever sence I was little boy."

"Reckon Mamma disremembered how good lookin' you-all are, and all."

"I jest a little puke last time she seen me. I don't remember you at all. All I remember is your brother Richard an' his billy goat hitched up. Let me ride

in the little cart," reminisced Hammond.

"You remembers a billy goat and disremember me. You think that nice?" the girl pouted.

"You jest a baby, that time. How I know you goin' to grow into the beautiful lady you are? I won't never fergit you again," Hammond essayed gallantry.

"You-all jest sayin' that. You doesn't really think I purty."

"Shore do. Awful purty an' awful sweet," Ham avowed.

"Reckon it all right to let a cousin say that, but I knows you jest a-coddin'."

"Not a-coddin' at all. It true."

"Folks at church will think we aimin' at gittin' married," Blanche suggested.

"Why will they think that?" Hammond asked, relieved to find Blanche was easing his talk for him.

"Us coming to church together. Won't know we jest cousins. Young man carry a girl to church, everybody reckons they goin' to git married. That's the way it is."

"Mayhap we is," Hammond declared.

"Is whut?" pressed Blanche.

"Mayhap we is goin' to git married. How you like to?" Hammond buzzed nearer the web.

"You got a nice plantation? Big house?"

"House ain't much. Leastwise ain't fine like Crowfoot, but we got a big passel of niggers. Ain't nobody got finer niggers than my papa," boasted Hammond.

"Niggers!" Blanche scoffed.

"I kin build a house, any kind of house you craves. Jest been a-waitin' until I marries to build a house—a fine house. House we got is good enough fer jest Papa and me. Papa was gittin' ready to start buildin' when my mamma up and die."

"I ain't thought about gittin' married—much," said Blanche, reverting.

"How'd you like to?"

"Is you-all askin' me? Is you proposin'?"

"Shore am. Don't know how else to do it. I'm bashful, kindly."

"We ain't knowed each other long, seems like, but—"

"We're cousins, ain't we? That makes a difference."

"I reckon it do," she agreed. "Did you ast Papa? He say it all right? Or did you aim to run off?"

"Ain't asted him yet. Ain't had no chanst; but I will. Hadn't thought about us running off—unlessen he say no."

"Papa purty choozy. I don't know whut he say."

"Ifn he say yes, do you say yes?"

"I reckon I do."

Hammond made no move, and Blanche added, "But don't kiss me yet.

Ast Papa first. Unlessen it jest a cousin kiss. Guess that all right."

Desire in Hammond was not absent, but it was to embrace, not to kiss. However, when he placed his arm about the girl's body she glued her lips to his and refused to let him go. And so they were, locked in each other's arms, oblivious of the swaying of the carriage over the rutted roads, when they rounded a wooded corner and met Charles, returning, horseback, from Centerville. They failed to see him until he was upon them.

Charles grabbed hold of the bridle of the off horse and Wash stopped the team. "Whut this mean—you a-huggin' o' my little sister? Right out fer everybody to see, too."

Blanche was flustered, caught. "This Cousin Hammond, Charles, Cousin Hammond Maxwell. Maxwell right, ain't it? I disremember. It all right fer cousins to kiss some, ain't it?"

"Papa know you out alone with this man—this Cousin Hammond, whutever his name be?"

"Course, he know. You didn't keep your promise to come home an' carry me to church meetin', and Cousin Hammond say he carry me."

"Papa don' know you out kissin' him and lovin' him, I reckon," said Charles. "You crawl outn that carriage and I git down offn this hoss and thresh you."

Hammond made as if to comply and Blanche pulled him back into the seat. "Don't pay no 'tention to him. Who he think he goin' to whup, anyway? Couldn't whup a pup."

Blanche was probably right. Besides being young, Charles was frail, long of leg and of arm, narrow of shoulder, hollow of chest, anemic of skin. His eyes were crossed and it was impossible to be sure just where he was looking. Despite his boniness and the stoop of his shoulders, he was at home in the saddle and sat his horse well.

"I don't hanker fer no fuss, Cousin Charles," Hammond said, "but ifn we fights, we fights. Your sister and me, we goin' to git married, and I craves to be friends."

"And if you tells Papa about us kissin', I tell whut you do to me," Blanche threatened.

"That two or three years back; nobody ain't goin' to do nothin' about it now. Besides, you as much to blame as I was," Charles replied.

"I's a-warnin' you, don't tell." Blanche knew her blackmail would be effective as it had been before. "Don't you tell nothin' either, Wash."

"Ain't nothin' to tell. I drivin' this team," replied the coachman. "Ain't got two sets of eyes."

"Well, drive ahead, and trot them hosses," ordered Blanche. "We already late fer that meetin'."

The carriage moved forward and Charles wheeled his horse toward Crowfoot.

"This road—," began Wash.

"Never mind, nev' min'. No back talk. I said trot 'em," said Blanche peremptorily.

Some two hours later the tired horses drew the carriage up the avenue of elms and halted in front of the Crowfoot mansion. As Hammond and Blanche alighted, they saw upon the gallery Major Woodford in hearty conversation with a big, moustached man of middle age and authoritative, ponderous manner. A Negro led a heavy saddle horse toward the stable.

"Come in, come in," urged the Major. "You remember Blanche, Colonel Butler. Her and her cousin ben to church meetin'."

"Course, course, I remember her. How she growed up. And purty, too. An' I was younger—," flattered the large man.

"This is my wife's cousin, Mista Hammond Maxwell, come a visitin'. Colonel Jim Butler. Colonel Butler is speakerin' around some about electin' Gen'al Jackson again, come next fall. Goin' to speak over Centerville tomorrer night."

"I hopes you goin' to vote the Gen'al in agin, Mista Maxwell, suh," said Colonel Butler. "Course, there ain't no question about it."

"I cain't vote—yet," answered Hammond, blushing for his youth.

"Well, support Gen'al Jackson, in that case; 'lectioneer fur him. Jest as good. You'll be votin' next time, I reckon, fer Marty Van," the Colonel dismissed the subject closest to his heart. "Maxwell? Maxwell? Ain't no relation to ol' Warren Maxwell, over by Benson, I reckon?"

"Warren's own boy," interposed the Major. "Wouldn't suppose Warren would git a boy like this one, would you?"

"Kindly see a resemblance now. Well, I declare. I didn't know you two war akin. I declare."

"Run in and take off your bonnet and git ready fer dinner. Dinner nigh ready," the Major prompted his daughter. "Us gents will santer about."

"Mighty purty, mighty purty," said the Colonel, watching Blanche depart. "Kindly sweet on her yourself, ain't you, Mista Maxwell? Come a visitin'? Sparkin', I'd call it."

Hammond wished that he didn't blush so readily.

"Let's us go over to the spring house and git us a drink of corn before we eats," suggested the Major. "Wife don't allow me to drink it in the house. She's temp'ance."

"Maybe we better not offend Miz Woodford," Colonel Butler objected.

"No offense at all. She knows I keep it. Jest won't have it in the house, that all. Damned preacher idy. Her jurisdiction don't go as fur as the spring house."

"A swallow would taste right good. Jest a swallow," said the Colonel as they walked along.

"Colonel Butler callin' means you got to bed with your Cousin Charles," the host explained to Hammond. "Reckon you don't mind. Bed wide and

Charlie clean. Washed all over yestiday to go to Centerville."

"Pleasures me all right, an' Charles don't gainsay," declared Hammond.

"Kindly caught us off balance, so many visitors at oncet. Gen'ally plenty of bedrooms, but old Mista and Miz Satherwait coming by fer the night. They church cronies of Beatrix's, goin' to Mobile, I believe. Mighty pious."

"I don't wish to intrude," said Colonel Butler. "I kin go on toward Centerville."

"Won't hear on it. Won't hear on it," said Woodford. "Plenty of room. Jest means them boys doublin' up, they and their wenches."

"Don't reckon I need no wench," said Ham.

"Course you do, course you do, after your trip. Unlessen your pappy ain't broken you in yet," urged the host.

" 'Lessen Warren Maxwell changed a lot, I reckon his boy know whut a wench is fer," said the Colonel, downing his second whiskey.

"Don't know ifn Charles knows or not. He has hisn, but don't seem to git her knocked. Charles kind o' puny," the Major said. "Backward like," he added. "His grandpa died of gallopin' consumption, an' Charles is made fer it. Coughin' around all the time."

The whiskey sharpened the appetites for dinner, which was served in a room which impressed Hammond as much as the parlor had. The dining room was in daily use, however, while the parlor was reserved for occasions. Here, too, the Empire motif had degenerated in its excess of ornament. The heavy white napery and the flowered borders on the thin china contributed a festive note to an otherwise solemn occasion.

An immature yellow girl swung the peacock brush and kept her eyes fixed on Charles. Colonel Butler, the oldest guest, invited to pronounce the blessing on the food, lowered his head and mumbled something that wound up in an "Amen," which everybody understood because it was inevitable. The servant in command in the handing about of the food was a brown man of middle age. He was assisted by old Wash, the Negro who had driven the young people to church.

"Whut did Brother Ben Jones talk about in his sermon this mornin'?" Mrs. Woodford wanted to know from the end of the table and raised her horn to her ear. "Always inspirin', Brother Jones's sermons."

"Somethin' about gamblin' and things," Blanche shouted across the table into the horn.

"A coursen he had a text. Don' you all remember?"

"Had a text about casting lots fer a coat with no rent money in it. I don't know. Didn't make no sense," said Blanche in a loud voice directed toward her mother. "And," looking toward Charles, "Brother Jones say that them as keeps fightin' niggers goes straight down to the bad place, 'cause you cain't fight niggers unlessen you gam'les on 'em."

"Jest whut I always sayin'—whut I said this very morning. Bless God," Beatrix nodded. "Ain't so bad in itself, mayhap, but it lead on to gam'lin'."

"I don't see how as fightin' two niggers together do no harm, so long as you jest bettin' niggers. Don't need to bet no money," objected Charles. "I likes to watch 'em—an' I'm goin' to have me one, too, one of these days."

"Seem like all the young men wants fightin' niggers these times," interposed the Colonel. "Reckon it only natchel to want to do whut everybody doin'."

Beatrix had turned her horn toward him when he began to speak, failed to catch what he said and resignedly shook her head.

"Reckon Hammond don't mess in that kind of sportin'?" Major Woodford angled for an opinion.

"I ain't had no fighters my own self, but I been into Benson and look at 'em. Right takin'. I don't see no harm."

"Me neither," said Charles, looking gratefully toward Hammond.

"Course, the fightin' in Benson ain't like the trained niggers they gotten in New Orleans," said Hammond.

"You ever been in New Orleans?" asked Charles.

"Yes, but I never seen no fightin' there—only at Benson."

"See, Papa. Cousin Hammond ben places, mos' ever' place. And you won't let me go nowhures," whined Charles.

"An' you ever had a fightin' nigger, I'd never speak to you agin, Hammond Maxwell," declared Blanche.

"Now, daughter," cautioned her father.

Hammond merely lowered his head and raised his eyes in a confident smile across the table.

"Well, I wouldn't," pouted the girl weakly.

"We'd still be cousins, I reckon," Hammond bantered.

The conversation shifted to the cotton market, the Negro market, General Jackson, fried chicken, bad roads, and Texas. Beatrix wore a fixed, uncomprehending smile and followed each speaker with her face, but she gave up any effort to hear what was said. The other members of the dinner party soon tired of shouting and talked in a natural tone.

Colonel Butler, when the diners had risen, walked over to his hostess and at the third try made her understand his appreciation of an excellent meal.

Major Woodford took Colonel Butler into the parlor, ostensibly to talk to him, but really to exhibit the room's grandeur, which the Colonel dismissed as "mighty fine, mighty fine." The Major was already converted to Jacksonian democracy, and the Colonel, knowing no other subject, agreed with the Major's comments until he could no longer control his desire to sleep and dozed off, sprawled in his chair.

Major Woodford, chafed at his guest's lack of interest in his house and in his conversation, wandered into the sitting room and interrupted the flirtation between Blanche and Hammond, who shouted intermittently at blank-faced Beatrix.

Blanche rose and said pointedly, "I reckon you and Papa wants to talk."

When she was gone, Hammond cleared his throat, which was dry with doubt. He stared at the Major and summoned at length, "Cousin Blanche and me, we likes each other right well."

"Ain't gittin' ideas so fast, son, air you?" smiled the Major. "Ain't knowed her more than three, four hours."

"Well, we cousins, you know," countered Ham. "Real sweet girl, seems like, and real purty."

"Raised good. One thing I say, Beatrix is good mother—strick but good."

"To tell true, I kindly lookin' around to marry me a wife. Papa think I ought to marry and settle down an' sire me a son."

"Good advice to a young man. Stops 'em from runnin' wild," agreed the Major.

"An' I sweet on Cousin Blanche. I wants your leave to spark her a little," said Hammond tentatively.

The elder man had his fish on the hook and proceeded to play it. "Reckon you didn't spark none this mornin', goin' to church?"

"To tell true, I did say that I liked ridin' with her. Kinder ast her ifn she liked me," admitted Hammond, who was unsure of what Charles might have said about encountering them on the road.

"That gal raised so innocent-like, she don't know who she like. She like anybody young-like who wear britches." Her father by his intonation turned his sarcasm into a boast.

"I wants to marry her, all right. I loves her. Knowed it first thing when I seen her in that purty dress."

"Didn't ast her?"

"Well, kind of sort of like. She say ast you. She say she like to marry me, but I has to ast you."

"I hardly knows whut to answer," meditated the father. He grew gravely sentimental. "I knows Blanche old enough to marry, but she sech a baby, seem like. Innocent and pure as a baby."

"Sure is," agreed Hammond.

"An' I don't know nothin' about you—'ceptin' your breedin'. A good mamma, an' a good enough papa, I reckon. Not very religious, but a good man. I ain't got no religion either, 'cept fer the women folk. I don't know how you treat my little gal."

"Treat her good. Best in the world. Good as I knows how."

"Don't know how she like livin' so fur away from her mamma and all. You ain't got a very fine house at Falconhurst, has you?"

"Aims to build a new place, soon as I marry."

"Kin you? Whut I mean, kin you afford it?"

"Shore kin. Papa kin. Ever'thing hisn, but I runs the place; has whut I craves."

"Doin' real well, eh? Makin' good crops of cotton?"

"Not cotton so much; niggers. Falconhurst dirt, like all Alabama dirt,

is purty much niggered out. Whure Papa gits his money at, his cash crop, is in buyin' strong young niggers an' raisin' 'em fer the New Orleans market."

"Blister on Falconhurst?"

"Blister?"

"Mor'gage?"

"Oh, no 'um. Ain't no mor'gage agin the plantation."

"An' the niggers. No mor'gages on them neither?"

"Naw, suh. Don't owe a cent on any nigger we got, nor on anythin'." Hammond was shocked at the idea of debt. "An' ever' nigger we got is sound and healthy, better than two hundred of 'em. Most of 'em young, but they growin' stidy-like, and the market goin' on up."

"Well, I have to think about it—talk to my wife some. I reckon we goin' to give you a yes about our daughter. Serious matter, marryin'. Reckon we might as well chance you as any of the rest."

"I sure thank you, suh."

"Remember, I ain't said it yet, but I reckon I will," and the Major paused. "I reckon, an' I helps you out, you goin' to help me out, too."

"Any way I kin, anythin'," Hammond pledged.

"I purty bad pressed fer money, the bank a-pressurin' me an' all—jest until after the crop is sold. That's all. I pay you back after the cotton crop."

"That ain't planted yet," said Hammond.

"But it goin' to be, and it shore to be good this year. Had three bad years a'ready. Time I was havin' a good crop."

Hammond was unable to follow the reasoning but was unwilling to lose the girl. "I understand you wants my papa to borrow you some money. I ain't got none, my own self."

"Well, yes. That is kindly it."

"How much you want?"

"I needs about five thousand dollars—to pay the in'erest on whut I owes the bank, an' to ready Blanche fer her marryin', that is."

"A heap of money, five thousand dollars. I doubts Papa got that much in cash to spare."

"He kin borrow, cain't he? Credit's good. You say he don't owe nothin'."

"Reckon could. But he won't. Afeared of owin'."

"It jest till cotton pickin'," the Major emphasized.

"Whyn't you loan from the bank your own self?" asked Hammond. "You got a good plantation and a passel of niggers."

"It plague me to tell it, but Crowfoot already blistered fer more 'n it worth, and ever' hand I got is mor'gaged fer all they will fetch. Jest a-holdin' on by my teeth. Bank liable to smash down on me any day. Seem like your papa could help out an old friend and a cousin-like to boot," the Major whined.

Crowfoot hospitality, open and freely offered as it was, always was accompanied by its owner's solicitation of a loan, if Hammond had but known

it. Not that Woodford didn't need money and not that he wouldn't have accorded a loan to another as freely as he asked one from a guest, if only he had been more affluent. Frugality he did not know. Stinginess, or even caution, he was unable to comprehend. To beg had become a habit. Every guest was evaluated as to the size of the loan which could be extracted from him, and Hammond Maxwell seemed like fair game for a sizeable touch. Moreover, he had Hammond on the hip; he was in a position to refuse him the hand of his daughter.

The Major had no intention to withhold his consent to the match, which was just what he had been hopefully waiting for, but Hammond didn't know how exigent his host was for an affluent husband for Blanche. Here was an innocent, gullible boy fallen like a plum into his hands.

What the father misjudged was the depth of Hammond's infatuation with Blanche. He mistook what was little more than a velleity for passion itself. The boy wanted a wife, or rather his father had talked him into taking a wife, and he was drawn to Blanche because he knew no more suitable candidates. He had fallen in love not so much with the girl as with her challis frock, a garish house, a glamorous life, and, above all, with Hammond blood, which he had heard extolled the whole of his life.

Hammond had already given a passing thought to what imperfections might lie beneath the gay challis. The house and the life had lost some of their allure for him in the knowledge that the house was mortgaged and the life was steeped in debt. All this grace of living was a bubble about to burst. And, as for Hammond blood, here sat his deaf, sallow, brown-toned Cousin Beatrix and he had observed the pimple spattered, hollow chested, squinting Charles across the dinuer table, both Hammonds. These were white folk, who are not to be considered in any analogy with blacks, but Warren Maxwell had inculcated in his son an awareness of the physical shortcomings of human animals. Hammond, himself, limped.

He had not changed his mind about marrying Blanche, but if his suit should be rejected he would suffer no anguish. He had not contemplated a marriage by purchase, but that is what Woodford's proposal implied, since the debtor would have neither the desire nor ability to repay a loan. That was clear, even to Hammond.

Five thousand dollars, the price of four or five strong bucks. He wondered whether he wanted Blanche so bad.

Hammond temporized. "Five thousand dollars," he rolled under his tongue. "Couldn't you git along with less? Pay part?"

"I figures I needs that much. Mayhap could shade it a little, but it would pinch me," conceded the Major.

"Papa might hap advance you half that much. I'll have to ast him. Reckon he will. Does most whut I ast him."

"I could give him my note of hand. That had ought to be good."

"Had ought to be, yes; till cotton harvest," Hammond joined in the pretense that the negotiation was a loan.

"Then I kin reckon on it?" Woodford sought finality. "When s'pose he send it?"

"Soon as I gits home, an' I kin git him to do it."

"I reckon as how you kin marry my daughter, then," the father blatantly reverted to the previous theme. "Seem like a fine, gen'rous, upright young man, that kin take good care of a gal."

"I take care of her, you kin lay to that."

"Blanche and Hammond goin' to marry," the Major shouted at Beatrix, who was lost in her own contemplation.

She cocked her trumpet and asked, "How?"

"Blanche and Hammond goin' to git married," her husband screamed again. "They in love."

"No?" Beatrix refused to believe.

"Yes," her husband assured her.

"Why, Cousin Hammond on'y jest come."

"That don't make no difference. Don't take a man long to make up his mind fer a purty piece like that Blanche."

Beatrix began to weep; she arose and kissed Hammond, continuing to weep in his arms. "You'll be good to her?" she demanded. "I've raised her up in the fear of the Lord, and she'll make you a good, faithful wife. Maybe she'll bring you to Jesus. That's all I ast, that she fetch you to Jesus."

Hammond got loose from Beatrix as soon as he could, but was forced to endure the shake of the Major's pudgy hand and the enthusiastic pat on the shoulder. "How it feel to be plighted?" Woodford tittered.

"Purty good," Hammond shrugged from his doubt. "Purty good," he repeated for emphasis.

"And Hammond goin' to borrow me twenty-five hundert dollars," Major Woodford added in a stentorian whisper into the horn.

Beatrix nodded that she had heard, and murmured with polite indifference, "That nice. That nice." No lady was concerned with money.

CHAPTER 11

THAT Sunday night Blanche and Hammond sat aside from the company, which now included the superannuated and devout Satherwaits, and planned their life together. Blanche's greatest interest was in the house Hammond was going to build for her; his was in the heir she was to bear him, about which, to Blanche's innocence, it was polite only to hint.

Blanche found it necessary to count on her fingers to set a propitious date for the wedding and chose the eighth of May, something more than two months hence. It was difficult for Hammond to get away from the plantation at that time, but it would be equally difficult all summer. Plowing would be finished, it was true, but the chopping of the weeds between the young cotton plants would require surveillance of the hands. He would make shift to spare a few days for the festivities of the wedding itself, but a prolonged honeymoon was out of the question. He promised to take his bride to New Orleans after the crop was in in the fall and after the danger from yellow fever, the perennial summer terror of that city, had passed.

Hammond said nothing about a ring to bind the betrothal and Blanche found it necessary to remind him. He was oblivious of the engagement ring, which no woman ever forgets; but, brought to his mind and explained, he promised to comply with custom. The dealer in Benson would have to order a ring from New Orleans or New York, and Blanche would have to be patient until he could send it to her. Her heart was set upon a diamond, which would not be available in stock in a town like Benson. Hammond had no concept of the cost of such a trinket, but he would get it—sure. He would get it.

Blanche was petulant with Hammond, or pretended petulance, at the postponement of the honeymoon trip, at the delay in obtaining the ring, at his determination to depart on the morrow, at his inattention to her, and, finally, at the ardour of his kisses when he took her out on the gallery to bid her good night. Petulance was, in fact, the scepter with which she ruled Crowfoot. When she wanted anything she pouted until she got it. And when she tried to avoid a chore, a duty, or an obligation, she whined until it was undertaken by somebody else.

Blanche was elated at her prospects. All the local swains were callow; worse, they were poor. Her betrothal was additionally romantic, even glamorous, because it was with a stranger, a man from strange parts, a man of the great world who had been to New Orleans, and a man whom she had toppled off his feet at their first meeting. All these attributes were items to boast of in Centerville and Briarfield. It would be four, even five, years before the onset of spinsterhood, but an unmarried girl of sixteen envisioned and feared it. Blanche was now safe. At worst, if something should go amiss and the wedding should never occur, she should have had her fling of romance and she could go through life in an aura of blighted love, enjoying the com-

passion of all who should know or surmise the details. But, despite her elation, Blanche had the forethought to break her lover to the bit of petulance.

Hammond, for his part, was complacently pleased with his bargain, for a bargain it had been. He could well put up with Blanche's petulance in the silent solace of the knowledge that she was bought and would be paid for. She would be his, his to dominate as he should choose. Of course, she was white and a lady, a granddaughter of Orestes Hammond, brother to his late grandfather, and he intended to treat her well, to do for her and provide for her to the extent of his strength and means. However, his method of acquiring her would leave him free to combat petulance by firmness, tears with callousness. Hammond did not foresee the necessity, and his concept was nebulous, but it offered him satisfaction. It was a bulwark against being bullied.

The day had been one of considerable excitement. Major Woodford and Colonel Butler had made frequent excursions to the spring house; the elderly Satherwaits were tired from their drive; Beatrix was bored with her inability to hear the conversation; Hammond had had a bumpy bed at the tavern the night before; Charles looked forward to conversation with Hammond; only Blanche was reluctant to retire early. The company was too polite for mere going to bed, which was vaguely indelicate.

The bedroom in which Charles and Hammond were to sleep was the only one on the ground floor, which was occasion for an apology to the guest. Its location, rather than its drab ugliness, was the reason. It was a big room furnished with pieces, largely of walnut, that had been left over from the furniture of the old house when the new one was built, pieces good enough for destructive boys. It was cluttered with a broken spinning wheel, and an extra dresser with a cracked mirror, a heavy round table piled with dust-covered clothes that were outworn or outmoded, two crippled chairs, as well as containing usable if badly designed bedroom furniture, quite as good, however, as that in Hammond's room at home. The carpet was woven of rags, but so were all the carpets at Falconhurst. There were no curtains on the wide bed with a frame for a canopy. Except for the junk, which the room had ample surplus space to accommodate, the informal room was not uncomfortable. It was off the sitting room, and a door from it led to the side gallery.

When Hammond entered, Charles was stripped to the waist, reclining on the bed, his stockinged feet upon the floor, too tired or too lazy to take off the rest of his clothes. His bearing toward Hammond had veered completely since the morning encounter upon the road. His affability was prompted by Hammond's statements that he had visited New Orleans and that he did not disapprove of fighting niggers, a subject upon which Charles desired to draw his guest out.

"Which side the bed you crave?" he asked.

"Don't make no difference," Hammond replied.

"I always sleeps this side. Dick sleep over there when he home."

"Your papa say Cousin Dick readin' the law in Centerville," said Hammond. "Must be right smart, fixin' to make a lawyer. Takes a heap of studyin'."

"Dick ain't a-goin' to be no lawyer. Readin' law is jest his excuse. Dick fixin' to be gam'ler."

"He older than you, ain't he?"

"Yas, he older, and Mamma's favorite. Gits ever'thin'. I don't hardly git nothin'. Even has to wear Dick's old clothes, cut down. Papa pore, plumb pore," Charles confessed. "Dick better lookin' than me, too. Makes a difference. He heavier, better set."

"You ain't through your growin' and makin' up," condoned Hammond. "You right big, leastwise tall fer your age."

"An' Dick looks straight. He ain't gotch-eyed like me."

Hammond's compassion could summon no satisfactory answer, and the subject was dropped in Charles' fit of coughing.

"You a-sparkin' Blanche?" her brother demanded abruptly. "Aimin' to marry her?"

"Well, yes, kinder," acknowledged Hammond.

"I likes you, even if you are my cousin. You my frien', ain't you? Well then, let Blanche alone."

"Your papa say I kin. He say it all right. Why you hostile?"

"I tells you I your frien'. She pizen. Blanche is pizen."

"She your sister. You hadn't ought to talk that a-way," Hammond sought to shame Charles.

"She my sister, and I knows her, knows all about her. I tell you she won't let you have no fightin' nigger."

"Who say I craves to have no fightin' nigger?"

"Everybody craves nigger fightin', anybody that got any sap. I un'erstands you at dinner that it warn't no wrong." Charles' confidence was shaken.

"To say true, I does crave me a fighter, an' Cousin Blanche ain't goin' to restrain me from gittin' me one. I lookin' around—kinder. I find one someday."

"I thought you had lots of good bucks. Folks say you rich."

"Ourn ain't fightin' niggers though. I got to git me a big vig'ous boy. I don't crave me none 'lessen I kin show a better'n than the other young gen'men fetches in to Benson. I wants a buck that kin whup all the rest 'n them."

"They too good, the othern won't match 'em. Jest takes their big bucks an' carries 'em back home."

"Young gen'lemen over around Benson right sportive. They have right good boys and they matches them all right. I aims to win."

"I jest craves to see 'em fight, no matter they wins or loses," said Charles. "That whut I doin' this evenin' whiles you all talkin'. Takes me a couple of bucks up beyant the wood lot whure Papa couldn't hear 'em, and I fights 'em. Course, I wouldn't let 'em bite or gouge; jest scuffled and pounded 'em.

Didn't want Papa to find out. You won't tell?"

"Course not. Ain't none o' my put in. Ain't my niggers," Ham washed his hands.

"One o' them bucks purty good—the tall, yaller one. Knock that other boy's tooth out and almost bit his big toe right off before I could stop him."

"Kind of ruint him, didn't it?"

"He jest a cotton hand. Papa won't notice it until he go to work him. I reckon that toe will git well," Charles dismissed the injury. "Wishes I could sneak that yaller one out and take him to Centerville, come Sataday. I tells you somethin', and you won't tell?"

"I tells you I ain't no blabber mouf," Ham promised.

"Well, I won me sixty-fi' dollars at Centerville yestiday evenin', side bettin' on three matches. I wins ever' one on 'em. Dick, he wins hisself more than a hunert."

"That purty good," said Ham indifferently, struggling with the boot on his stiff leg.

"Don't want Papa should know—Blanche leasten of all. She make me give it to her. She hold somethin' I do a long time ago over my head. She pizen, I tells you. Let her be. I wants to keep my money to run it up. Why you reckon them wenches don't come?" Charles answered his own question, "That Sukey afeared of you."

He strode to the outside door to call the girls and found them huddled together on the edge of the gallery, waiting to be summoned. "Git yourself in here, and shuck down," he ordered them.

Hammond was embarrassed, torn between his misgivings about the propriety of receiving a wench into his bed in this household on the one hand and the exhibition of his lack of virility on the other. "Reckon I don't need none tonight. I kind of tired," he temporized.

"It all right. Papa say it all right. Papa say give you a wench," Charles urged, while the two girls shed their simple clothes, perfunctorily.

"This Sukey kind of tall and stringy like, but Dick think she right good. She Dick's when he at home. Ain't no virgins on the place, 'ceptin' some blacks that ain't right ripe yet."

"Sukey all right. Ain't you, Sukey?" Hammond declared, without enthusiasm.

"Yas, suh, Masta," Sukey admitted, diffidently.

"Coursen, she ain't so round like as yourn, ain't fleshed out," Hammond admitted.

"This here Katy gittin' too fat. Got to cut down on her eatin' some," commented Charles, running his hand over the girl's flank and pinching her ample calf. "An' if you ruther trade—," he suggested hospitably, but failed to conceal his reluctance and Hammond declined.

Katy was low and wide, moon-faced, short necked, and fat. She stood on a wide base and waddled provocatively when she walked. She enjoyed her

status as her young master's concubine and Hammond thought her presumptuous in her display of familiarity. He would not have tolerated her gratuitous intimacies.

Hammond sat on the side of the bed and asked Sukey to help him with his nether clothes. "I crippled, you knows," he explained to Charles.

"I reckons you has a body servant at home?" Charles asked.

"Jest a young saplin', who he'ps me some. My papa's servant usen to take care of me up until this little buck craved to do it."

"Papa won't let me have no buck. Say I kin dress myself," Charles complained. "He got one."

"You ain't cripped," said Hammond removing his undershirt and scratching his chest.

"You nice and hairy all over you, ain't you? I ain't got none, 'ceptin' a few on my laigs. Reckon, mayhap, I part woman?"

"Don't mean nothin'," said Hammond, rubbing his hand over his leg the better to excite the other's envy.

"I ain't hung very big, neither," Charles said apologetically, looking enviously at Hammond.

"That ain't nothin'. Depend upon whut you kin do. You ain't no stud nigger."

Hammond didn't see where he got it nor what it was for, but Charles was extending toward him a sheaf of switches bound together with a string of torn cloth to form a handle. "Want to use this," Charles asked, nodding toward Sukey, who cowered at sight of it.

"Whut is it?" asked Hammond.

"Whut it look like? It's a quiver of withes. Want to use it on yourn?"

"Sukey ain't done nothin'. Why I want to whup her?" asked Hammond, baffled.

"Thought you might. Dick does it to her, don't he Suke?"

"Yas, suh," the girl confirmed.

"Dick learned me to do it. Kindly makes a man feel good, seems like. Lay down," Charles turned to the fat Katy and nodded toward the bed. "Turn over. Katy likes it; doesn't you, Katy?" There was no reply and Charles had to repeat his question.

"Yas, suh, Masta, suh. I likes it, an' you wants to. Yas, suh, Masta, suh, please, suh, not too hard, suh, Masta, suh," Katy's tone belied her acknowledgment.

She held her tongue until the third stroke of the multiple whip, when she could keep silence no longer. "Oh, Masta, suh, no, that 'nuff. Masta, suh, Masta, suh. Oh-o-o-o!" she finally screamed.

Charles picked up one of his socks, the thing that was handiest, stuffed it in Katy's mouth, and continued the chastisement.

Hammond was aghast at what was occurring. His impulse was to grab the switches from the frail boy and wind them around his naked legs. It was

not so much a violation of hospitality that stayed him, since he knew that Major Woodford would not countenance his son's wanton infliction of pain upon the innocent girl, as a reluctance to demonstrate that there exists any higher authority over a Negro than the whim of the master. He did not want to risk the inculcation of rebellion. Moreover, he knew that his interference would anger Charles, who on subsequent occasions would wreak on Katy his resentment of Hammond's act.

Hammond watched the whipping, pleading, "Stop, Charles. That's enough. You hurtin' her."

Charles laughed to see the wench cringe.

The beating neither lasted very long, nor was it very severe. Hammond imagined that it must be painful, however, despite that no skin was broken nor welts raised. Katy ceased to weep the moment she was sure that Charles had finished. She drew her arm across her face to wipe away the tears and withdrew the sock from her mouth.

"You kin git up, now," Charles said to her. "Whut you say?"

"Thankee, Masta, suh, thankee," without specifying whether the gratitude was for flogging her or for desisting from it.

"Whut you do that fer?" demanded Hammond. "Katy didn't do nothin'."

"I don't know. I jest likes to do it. I does it ever' night, don't I, Katy?" And Charles did, in fact, appear to feel better. He threw back his shoulders, his crossed eyes assumed a beam of confidence, and his stature seemed greater. The whipping he had administered gave him a sense of dominance, even if that dominance was only over a helpless young Negro girl. It was good for his withered ego. He felt better. "Katy like it. Doesn't you, Katy?" Charles repeated his earlier question.

"Yas, suh, Masta," Katy's answer was forthright now that the experience was over. "I likes it," she affirmed, with the appearance of being truthful. She did not relish pain; but, once the pain ceased, she enjoyed her subservience to a man who had demonstrated his mastery of her. Neither Charles nor Katy was enough convinced of that mastery without its demonstration. Katy did indeed like it.

"Mayhap, Papa let me ride over to Falconhurst, when you gits that fighter you goin' to git, and I kin see him," Charles reverted to his major interest.

"Mayhap he will. But you ain't goin' to whup my wenches, like you does yourn, an' you cain't fight my bucks together jest to see 'em. We'll ast your papa, come mornin'."

While Hammond knelt by the right-hand side of the bed to utter his prayer, Charles and Katy climbed into the deep featherbed on the opposite side.

"You reckon that prayin' ever' night do you no good?" asked Charles when Hammond had mumbled his amen.

"I don't reckon it do, but I promised my mamma, 'fore she died," Hammond answered. "Don't you ever pray?"

"I gits 'nough of that trash mornin's after breakfast. Ever'body kneels down, even the house niggers, even Papa; cain't nobody git outn it. You'll see. You marries Blanche, you'll be kneelin' down ever' mornin'," Charles threatened and was ignored.

Sukey waited for her unhurried lover to enter the bed so that she might pinch out the candle.

Despite the width of the great bed, it was crowded. Sukey emitted an odor, whether merely unclean or, as the white man thought, racial, that Hammond found unpleasant. He would have dismissed the wench and have gone to sleep, but for the violation of hospitality. Charles, on the other side of the bed, would see in such behavior a contempt for the best entertainment Crowfoot had to offer. Hammond performed what he looked upon as a duty without pleasure and with little satisfaction; mere detumescence, a voiding of accumulated waste.

Sukey sensed Hammond's apathy, but, none the less, thanked him for his favor, as Dick had taught her to do.

"Git out now and let me turn over and git some sleep. This bed too crowded," whispered Hammond.

"You means you don' want me no more?" Sukey asked in surprise.

"Not tonight," groaned Hammond.

"Whure I go? Whure I sleep?"

"Whure you wants to, on'y be gone outn here," said Ham with a show of impatience. "Go back to the quarters, an' you wants, or on the floor."

"I be cold. Masta Richard, he don' never throw me out of bed," Sukey complained.

"Well, wrap in a quilt. Think I wants to lay and smell you all night?"

To return to the quarters would be to admit to the other Negroes her fall from the grace of her lover's bed. She couldn't bring herself to do it. Perhaps, if she remained, the white man would avail himself of her again. She crossed the room to get a quilt from a stack of bedclothes on a chair, evoking Charles' impatience.

"Fer Christ sake, Suke! Whut's the matter? Lay down and behave yourself."

Sukey obeyed. She flung herself naked on the carpet and shivered through the night, protected only by her dress and Katy's, which she was able to reach and pull over her.

Hammond was disturbed through the night by the bedfellows of whom he could not so easily rid himself as he had done of Sukey. He was aware of the couple's nestling in each other's arms; he felt the stretching and relaxation of the ropes that supported the mattress; he heard the little squeals of delight or of pain; sensed the clipping and kissing that was going on across the bed from him, Charles' exigence and Katy's feigned denial of herself.

Ham's disturbance was not physical, however, it was not mere noise, nor lack of space, nor was it movement. It was disgust, bordering upon nausea,

that a white man should assume an amatory equality with a Negro wench. It was beneath the dignity of his race—somehow bestial. A wench was an object for a white man's use when he should need her, not a goal of his affections, to be commanded and not to be wheedled. It disturbed Hammond only less that Charles should kiss Katy with passion than that he should whip her without blame. How could white lips endure the contact with the yellow skin? How could Charles so demean himself, aware of another white man lying beside him?

Hammond dropped off to sleep, but when he awoke in the night he was again disquieted by the pair of lovers sleeping entangled beside him. Did not this Katy, Hammond wondered, envision equality, however evanescent, with her master? That mattered little. What mattered was the white man's stooping.

Scarcely had the dawn broken when Hammond arose. He wanted to avoid the embarrassment he expected Charles to exhibit when he should get up, to save himself the embarrassment of Charles' failure to show any. Sukey lay on the floor, her legs drawn up to keep warm, and Hammond spread a quilt over her. His pants went on easily, but he had to struggle with his left boot, as was usual when he put it on without assistance. Sukey had relaxed her position and stretched out before Hammond left the room, by the gallery door to keep from waking the household. The outdoor air was fresh and crisp and the morning star had paled but was still visible. Hammond ambled about in a critical mood. He observed gates off hinges, a field of dry thistles seeding the adjacent land, wheelbarrows overturned in the weeds and left to the elements, a fruit orchard blighted and unpruned, a worm fence with half the rails broken. He wondered what purpose it served. Shiftlessness annoyed him.

Smoke began to rise from the cabin chimneys and Wash shuffled toward the stable, rubbing his eyes as he went. Women trudged with buckets to the well and returned with them filled and balanced on their heads. They were mostly of middle age and Hammond wondered at an economy that would retain Negroes that could no longer breed.

Two yellow boys appeared from behind a cabin, but saw the stranger and retreated. Hammond noted that one of them limped. This might be the buck with the bitten toe that Charles had used yesterday for fighting, but he seemed barely old enough for such sport. A belated young wench hobbled zigzag toward the well; she would breed, perhaps, if she were worth breeding from, but she was good for nothing else. Were all the Crowfoot hands either old or crippled? What did a planter mean, keeping and feeding such servants? No wonder the plantation was unkempt and dilapidated—all but the main house! No wonder Woodford was in debt and needed money.

Hammond wandered back toward the house and sat down on the gallery, waiting for the family to stir. Sukey came out the side door and greeted him on her way to the quarters. It was not long before Katy followed, and Charles soon appeared.

"Wants to git them wenches gone afore Mamma gits up," he explained. "I reckon she know, but—."

"Course, she deaf," said Hammond. "Maybe—."

"That Blanche, she know and she blab. She make trouble however she kin. You ain't goin' to marry her? I likes you and I'm a-tellin' you," Charles warned again.

"Yas, I'm goin' to marry your sister!" Hammond declared positively.

"You kin crawdaddle outn of it," Charles suggested. "Tell her you pore. She don' want no pore man. You too good fer her, tha's all."

"You don't know if I good or not. I reckon she right pure and good and simple. Seem like to me."

"You honest. She ain't. She won't let you keep your fightin' nigger, I tell you, jest to be honery."

"I reckon she git used to it."

Major Woodford came out and summoned the boys to breakfast. "Sleep all right?" he asked Hammond, "Or did Stick-in-the-Mud, here, kick you outn bed?"

"First rate," said Hammond. "Charles right quiet."

"He didn't like Sukey though. Put her on the floor first thing," said Charles.

"Don't talk sech things, Charlie. 'Tain't nice," admonished the Major. "Anything wrong, suh?"

"I through with her; that all. No fault of hern," explained Ham.

"Don't like to belly-up all night, eh? I do—or did. Reckon Skeezix here takes after his pappy. Used to like to whup 'em and then love 'em. I liked 'em black, an' never mind the musk, but nowadays boys finicky—got to have 'em yaller."

Could it be that the father knew and approved of the son's behavior? Hammond had no desire to discuss it.

Mrs. Woodford presided at the breakfast table with her hollow voice and her horn. Blanche appeared late in long riding habit—the most striking costume in her sparse wardrobe. She had timed her entrance to occur after the rest of the party was seated when all eyes would be upon her, although she was interested only in Hammond's appraisal.

"Plannin' to ride some this mornin', darlin'?" asked Beatrix, cocking her horn.

Blanche nodded and shouted, "Hammond and me goin' a-ridin' right after breakfast."

"You'll wait fer prayers, of course," said her mother. "Mista and Miz Satherwait is here, and I'm sure Colonel Butler is a godly man. Hammond will kneel down with us."

"Cousin Hammond don't have to say his prayers," Charles announced. "He knelt down las' night."

Beatrix beamed on Hammond. "I hope, Son, you kneeled with him. I

knows Cousin Hammond comin' to Jesus." The Satherwaits nodded.

"I'm afeared I cain't go a-ridin', Cousin Blanche, or wait fer prayer neither," Hammond excused himself. "I got a long ride ahead and got to git me started. I craves to git me to Coign Plantation afore noon or a little after, and to git on my way to Falconhurst before nightfall."

Blanche intended merely to pout, which she believed she did very prettily, but found herself crying and abruptly left the table. Hammond pushed back his chair and followed her into the sitting room, trying to appease her.

"You don' love me! You don' love me! I wouldn' marry you if they never was another man!" percolated into the dining room and appalled the girl's father, who hastened into the sitting room to settle the quarrel which threatened his calculations.

Charles' satisfaction was dampened by his fear that Blanche would never permit the boy to escape from her. Beatrix looked from one to another for an explanation of what was going on, but amid the embarrassment of the party, nobody gave her one.

"Now, now, Blanche, darlin'," the Major consoled his daughter; "Hammond got to return to his plantation. He a busy man. You s'pose he propose marriage the first day, an' he could stay an' spark?"

"But, Papa!" protested Blanche, drying her eyes. "It ain't fair, ain't decent. Nobody will believe me. Nobody think I got me a beau at all."

"We'll show 'em, won't we, Hammond? The quicker Hammond git home and talk to his papa, the quicker he git back and you gits married," said the Major.

"He already say he come the eighth of May," sobbed Blanche. "I wants he should stay now."

"I has got to git home and buy me that di'mon' ring," wheedled Hammond. "The quicker I buys it, the quicker it come."

This argument appeased the girl, who without being adult had assumed to play an adult role. She blew her nose and wiped her eyes. Hammond stooped and kissed her awkwardly and the three returned to the dining room.

The Major beamed. "Jest a lovers' fuss," he proclaimed proudly. The tears of reconciliation still sparkled in Blanche's eyes as she again took her seat at breakfast, which she couldn't eat. She had centered upon herself the attention of the entire table and believed she had gathered its compassion. She was injured; her project to ride over the countryside and display her fiance to her own kind was blasted. The gossip and the titters of envy provoked by Hammond's presence with her in church would die. She would be unable to gloat upon her conquest. She resumed her pout, partly because she had a grievance but mostly because she thought it enticing.

As the party rose from the table, Charles placed his arm about Ham's shoulder and whispered a reminder, "You goin' to ast Papa kin I come to visit you at Falconhurst?"

Despite his distaste for the boy, Hammond's invitation was genial. "Major

Woodford," Ham said, "Charles here wantin' to ride Falconhurst way. He right welcome, an' you lets him."
trus' him."

"I reckon he purty young to go gallivantin'," replied the Major. "Cain't

"I ain't never been nowhures. Cain't go nowhures. I ain't no little boy no longer," argued the boy. "Cousin Hammond, he ben to New Orleans an' all over. I most as old."

"Don't ack like," said his father. "Mayhap and ifn you sends that money, I let him go."

"Course, he come, he got to do like I say," specified Hammond. "Won't have my niggers ruint nor nothin'."

"Switch him. Take down his drawers and switch him, an' he don't ack good," the father suggested. "I has to sometimes, doesn't I, son?"

"Not in long time. Not sence Christmas," Charles blushed. "An' you lets me go to Falconhurst, I be good, do jest like Cousin Hammond say, not make no trouble at all."

"We'll see, an' that money come. You has to have new clothes. We'll see an' if Dick ain't got a suit fer you."

Hammond ordered his horse, and went into his bedroom to fetch his saddle-bags. He stole a brief aside with Blanche in the parlor, from which the pair emerged embarrassed, the girl's hair disheveled and tears in her eyes. Wash held the stallion by the bridle. The Major repeated his directions how best to get to Coign and warned of mire in the road through the swamp for about four miles. "Veer left at that twisted oak in the middle of that fork an' you'll come to Coign," he cautioned. "Veer right an' you wind up nowheres at all."

Hammond dreaded Beatrix's kiss, which he knew that he couldn't avoid, braced himself and got it over. Beatrix wiped her eyes. Hammond shook hands all around. To Colonel Butler and the Satherwaits, the farewell was perfunctory; Charles was nervous, and Hammond wondered at the boy's anxiety to get him gone; Major Woodford held on to Hammond's hand, pumping it. "Reckon I better write a letter to your papa about that money?" he suggested aside. "I ain't very handy writin' letters."

"Won't do no good," Hammond told him. "Papa do whut I say. He send it—sure."

A final seemly kiss for Blanche, ardent enough to confirm his affections, brief enough not to violate propriety, and Hammond was in the saddle. The group stood back to be out of the way of the wheeling horse. What was intended as a brave smile, the stuff of heroines, appeared on Blanche's face.

Hammond walked his horse, looking back and waving, till he reached the public road and turned south. The rest of the party could not escape Beatrix's morning prayer meeting, and the Satherwaits had no desire to.

"A nice young gen'leman, and right well fixed, seems like," opined Mrs. Satherwait. "A good wife will bring him right to Jesus."

"I aims to," said Blanche possessively.

CHAPTER 12

THE horse under him again, the saddle between his legs, felt good to Hammond. The horse was fresh and broke into a slow canter. Hammond was not aimless, but he was in no haste except to escape from the cloying affability of Crowfoot. The sunshine poured down upon him, almost uncomfortably warm.

Well, he had accomplished his errand, had got what he had come for. He was satisfied. Marriage was an obligation to his Hammond blood, which should not be permitted to perish. Blanche was petulant and would need to be humored. But what was a white lady for but to humor? This one was certainly pretty, at least what parts of her he could see. He reflected on the challis dress. How small Blanche's waist! How full her breasts, and she so young! How voluptuous the hinted curve of her buttocks! Hammond had little misgivings about her shape. What bothered him was the expanse of pale flesh. He wouldn't be required to look at it, but he would know it was there, pallid and unwholesome. He would get used to it. He failed to consider Beatrix as the favor to which his wife might come, deaf and sallow and pious. To give the inexperienced boy's astuteness credit, he saw through Blanche's pretense of piety—a mere conforming to her mother's mores, indeed to the mores of the community, a bulwark, if she should ever require it, for her behavior. Hammond discounted the need for it.

The road was good and he let the stallion have his head for a stretch, but the girth seemed loose and he drew up, dismounted and tightened it. The road led through a wood and Hammond felt strangely lonely. It was a new sensation; he had never been lonely. He had no desire to return to Crowfoot and the meaningless chatter, but rather a longing to get back to Falconhurst, to see his Negroes and pnt them to work.

It was his father's errands quite as much as his own that took Hammond from home; it was his father's desire, even more than his own, that he be married; and it was his father's passion for pure Mandingos that was taking him to Coign Plantation. Riding out of the woods into a clearing, Hammond saw turkey buzzards against the blue of the sky, wheeling and maneuvering. He watched the ease and grace with which they soared and glided. Further on, down the wind from a clump of trees, his nostrils caught the stench of carrion.

He had come five, possibly six, miles on his unhurried way without meeting anybody, but was sure he was on the right way to Coign when behind him he heard a horse at a hard gallop. He turned in the saddle and the other horseman raised his arm and beckoned him to wait. It was Charles.

"I'm a-goin' with you," Charles declared out of breath.

"No you not. You turnin' around and a-goin' right back to Crowfoot. You runnin' off."

"No, I not. Papa done say I kin," protested the boy.

"Say you kin whut?" Hammond demanded.

"Say I kin go home with you to Falconhurst. Don' you want me?"

"I wants you, all right. You welcome. But you lyin'."

"Papa did so, he said," Charles was vehement. "I ast him, and he say I should ketch up and go along with you. I swear he say it, I swear on the Bible."

"You hadn't ought to run your horse like that. He all over foam and he breathin'," admonished the older boy.

"I had to ketch up, didn' I?"

"I still thinks you lyin' to me. An' you runnin' off, you not goin' to wait fer your whuppin' till you gits back home. I goin' to give it to you my own self."

Charles made an effort to focus his eyes to look Hammond in the face. "I swear," he said.

Hammond still did not credit the youth's oath, but he had no intention to retrace his way to catch Charles in a lie. Admiration at least warrants tolerance, and affection begets kindness. Hammond distrusted Charles but his dislike for him had moderated, and Charles' company took the edge off the loneliness Hammond had begun to feel—not so much loneliness as strangeness, a sense of being alien to that countryside, lost and yet secure of his way.

Hammond slowed his horse to a walk to enable Charles' horse, a heavy hoofed, old gelding, to recover his wind. A big hawk swooped and rose with a young rabbit in its talons; Charles thought the bird might be a young eagle.

The horses trotted a mile or more and the boys were silent. They came to the swamp, for which they had to slow down and through which the horses picked their way. In stagnant pools the water hyacinths were beginning to bloom, and scattered wild plum trees leaned awry in blossom. The light slanted between the young leaves of the trees in visible shafts, like dry rain. A flock of wild turkeys took wary flight with a clatter of wings. Hammond knew what made the noise but was unable to see more than a single old tom that gobbled away on foot. Many small denizens of the swamp scampered away at the approach of horses, but a defiant wildcat held his ground upon a log, arched and spitting until the horses were even with him, when he lost his courage and disappeared into the brush.

The road was washed and treacherous, seemed long unused, but it was not so muddy as Ham had expected it to be. Several times the horses mired to their fetlocks and once Charles' horse stepped into the soft clay halfway to its knee. The horse was frightened but pulled its leg out safely.

The riders were glad to get out of the dank, venomous, insect-infested slough into the rising, open land. They passed a weather beaten shack and waved at two half-clothed and bedraggled children hanging on what served as a fence and saw three young ones who retreated furtively behind the building. Unappetizing as the place appeared, they were hungry and went back

to see whether they could obtain something to eat.

The two children, seeing the riders returning, broke and ran. Tying their bridles to the wobbly fence, Hammond and Charles went to the house and knocked at the casing beside the open door of the one-roomed shell. A tumid-bellied, sunken-faced, bare-footed drab of uncertain middle years appeared from somewhere in the inside and faced them in truculent silence. The boys stated their hunger and willingness to pay for food. The woman scratched in her stringy, blond hair, hesitated with indecision, and retreated without uttering a word. Hammond looked at Charles, and Charles turned at least one of his eyes upon Hammond. They had taken a simultaneous step toward their horses when the woman returned with two large gourds of clabber, which she thrust into their hands. She vanished again and came back with large hunks of cold pone.

"Four bits," she said, the first words she deigned to speak. Hammond paid.

It was poor fare, but it stayed their appetites, and they felt better. The two children who had hung on the fence sneaked back and watched the travelers eat. They were about twelve or thirteen years old. Although both wore what passed for dresses, one appeared to be a boy. They were plump and well nourished enough, but followed unabashed with covetous eyes each hand to mouth gesture. At length the girl asked, unable to restrain herself longer, "Kin I have whut you don' eat?"

He would have ordered a Negro to be well switched for less, but Hammond broke his pone in two and extended half of it to the girl, who grabbed it and ran away without acknowledgment. Charles gave half of his pone to the boy, who took it and chewed on it, but did not run.

"How fur is it to Coign Plantation? Does you know?" Hammond asked the boy, who merely shook his head.

"You nigger buyers?" the boy asked after a time.

"Reckon not," said Hammond. "Why you wants to know?"

"Goin' to Coign," the boy explained. "You gen'lemans then," he satisfied himself.

Charles placed his emptied gourd on the stoop outside the door, and the woman, who must have been watching through a crack in the walls, for there were no windows, immediately pounced upon it.

"How fur to Coign Plantation?" Hammond asked her.

She motioned with a jerk of her head in the direction he already knew, but made no reply about the distance.

As the two youths climbed back into their saddles, Hammond spat and said, "An' folks talks about slavery!"

"Whut folks?" asked Charles.

"Why, folks at the North, them abolitioners and all, even some right down here at the South."

"Whut does they say about it?"

"They says it ain't right—ain't right fer some men to own other men. No slave ever live like them folks whure we jest et. They needs slavery. Clean 'em up, learn 'em manners."

"But they white folks. I don't care an' they be trash, they white," the boy objected.

"Well?"

"Ain't no white folks ever slaves?" Charles was incredulous.

"Back yander they was, in Rome and places. Some places, I reckon, now folks owns white slaves."

"An' works 'em? An' whups 'em, an' breeds 'em, an' fights 'em, and sells 'em, jest like niggers?"

"Jest like niggers," Hammond confirmed.

"I never knowed that. I wouldn't like it," he added. "I wouldn't crave bein' nobody's slave and be ordered and whupped."

"You wouldn't be, because you a gen'leman. You'd own 'em."

"I'd like to own me a likely, purty, little white wench with straight hair and no musk. I'd like that. But fer fightin' I'd ruther have niggers. Niggers better. Coursen, I reckon a body could have both, white wenches and nigger fighters," Charles built his fantasy.

"I reckon," Ham echoed without attention. They were approaching a house, small but orderly, with a double cabin behind it. A white man, a black adult Negro and a yellow boy worked together in the field beyond the house.

"We had ought to have waited. This place looks cleaner," said Hammond.

"Ain't hongry now," replied the other.

When they were even with the place where the men were working, they reined their horses, and Ham called to inquire the distance to Coign. The white man left his work and came to the stake-and-rider fence. The knobby joints of his angular figure could be seen through his clothes. He was around thirty, but some three weeks growth of heavy black beard made him appear older. A blacksnake whip hung around his neck. Ham repeated his question.

"Coign?" the stranger countered, spitting out his tobacco and bracing himself against the top rail of the fence. "About four or five mile, I reckon, nearer five. Go straight ahead till the road forks, a piece down that way, and take the left fork. Cain't miss. A big twisted oak right in the fork. Cain't miss. Go left."

"Obliged to you, suh," said Ham.

"Ain't nothin'. Goin' to Coign? Ol' Colonel Wilson still alive?"

"I reckon. Didn't know he sick."

"He ol'," said the man.

"Right likely niggers," Ham nodded toward them.

"The big one purty good, but gittin' ol'. Him an' his wench the only ones I got, but goin' to have me another one. Got the wench in the way agin. Reckon she was done breedin' but ol' Carlo there and me both been a-workin' her and she ketched at last. Hope the sucker will be a female an' give me a

start. My pappy left me the old ones."

"And the boy?" asked Ham.

"Him? He ain't mine. I jest a-breakin' him for the gen'leman what owns him. Kindly aims to set up fer a breaker. Lots of bad niggers about needs breakin'."

"How you breaks 'em?" Charles inquired.

"Plenty of heavy work, a little gradual starvin', no breedin', and steady floggin'. Pagan," he called the boy, "git you over haer."

The tall yellow youth clambered over the rough ground with long rapid steps until he was just out of whip reach of the man, who beckoned him closer. The breaker pulled the whip over his head and wrapped it around the boy's legs twice to which the boy each time responded with a "Please, Masta, suh!"

"I only had him a week. He goin' to be all right. In about a month, send him home plumb broke. He'll be skinny, but he'll mind whut he told," the man explained. "Pagan, scrape your belly fer the gen'men."

The boy fell flat on his face. The breaker walked backward in a small circle and the boy wriggled forward without raising his body from the rough ground. The man cracked his whip, without touching the boy, but the threat evoked another "Please, suh, Masta."

"Now, show the gen'men how you licks leather," ordered the breaker, and the boy wiggled closer and licked his boot lightly. The breaker cracked the whip again, but the Negro was too close to benefit from the blow. "When I says lick leather, I means lick," declared the breaker and the boy repeated the demonstration with energy on both boots.

"Climb that fence and lick fer the gen'men," commanded the breaker and the boy scrambled into the road.

Hammond sidled his horse away from the boy. "Not mine," he declined, but Charles kicked his boot out of the stirrup and, chuckling, submitted it to be licked.

"Taste good?" asked the man.

"Yas, suh," lied the boy.

"Now you kin climb back and I let you kiss this whup," the breaker rewarded the boy for his obedience. "I learned him all that in jest a week. An' either one of you has any bad niggers," he concluded the demonstration, "remember 'at I breaks 'em fer you—cheap."

"I doesn't have bad niggers, and I has I gits me shet of 'em. I doesn't send 'em to no breaker," said Hammond, without intending to betray his disgust.

Hammond thanked the man again and turned his horse toward Coign. Charles followed but looked back and watched the white man and yellow buck return to their interrupted labor.

"Reckon I could learn any of our niggers that way?" Charles speculated as he rode along.

"Whut way you mean?" asked Hammond.

"Why, to scrape their belly and lick boots and sech."

"Reckon you could, an' you wants," Hammond spat. "I don't crave mine to. Don't believe you crave it of yourn."

"Katy, mayhap," Charles considered. "An' I had me a fightin' nigger, I'd make him. Never seen nothin' like it before."

"Never want to see it agin," said Ham.

"I don't believe you ever goin' to git you no fighter, Cousin Hammond," Charles ventured. "Let's git us one."

"Sometimes think I won't neither," Hammond agreed. "The kind I craves ain't easy to come by. They hard to find, and they costs."

"But they makes you money, ifn they wins."

"Ifn they wins."

The two riders reached the fork. There was no mistaking it. The trunk of the large oak was twisted twice, like a corkscrew; it must have been artificially warped as a sapling, for oaks grow straight up. They took the road to the left, which led uphill.

Coign sat on an eminence that was hardly to be called a hill. "The Coign" in letters of Gothic, surrounded by filigree of wrought iron, stretched above the two gates of the same material, which stood open. The gilded knobs at the tops of the pickets which made the gates were so tarnished that they were nearer black than golden. Beyond the gates stretched a straight avenue of walnut trees, their branches meeting and interlacing, between the sturdy trunks of which could be seen the pillars of a Doric portico. Ham had not anticipated such magnificence, but the place needed no sign to proclaim it The Coign.

The walnut trees ended abruptly on a lawn, but the driveway continued around the lawn in a symmetrical oval. The expanse of grass and weeds was broad enough to permit one coming up the avenue to stop at its end and enjoy the complete façade of the brick Georgian mansion, including the wings which flanked it at either end.

This was a mansion indeed. Chaste, and even austere, the house was uncluttered with ornamentation, and the eye was left free to appraise the delicate, yet sturdy, proportions of the whole edifice. Four tall chimneys took flight from the ends of the main part of the house, but failed to relieve the somber picture. The white paint scaled from the heavy cornice and from the window frames of the wings, but under the roof of the portico it was unmarred.

A rheumatic old mulatto, neatly dressed and shod, appeared from around the corner of the house to take the horses. "Good evenin', gentlemen. Your horses are fatigued. I'll see to them," he said, bowing but without obsequiousness, and gesturing, palm upward, toward the door.

Hammond, followed by Charles, stepped on the porch and raised the brass knocker. Tender spears of yellow grass grew in a crack between the

flagging of the floor. The wait was long and Ham watched a wren that carried straws to a nest at the top of one of the sandstone columns. The chirps of the bird and the whir of some insect were the only sounds, and Ham was startled by his own voice when he remarked, "Nobody here, seem like, but only that ol' buck." He bad reached toward the knocker a second time when the door swung silently open.

"Gentlemen!" the servant who opened it greeted the youths. "Mista Wilson is sleeping, but is due to wake. Will you not come in?" he asked cordially but without enthusiasm, and led the way across the wide hall into a large drawing room, where he invited them to wait. He adjusted the curtains to admit more light, then withdrew.

This ancient butler had Caucasian features and was all but white. His jowls sagged and there were veritable bags beneath his eyes, but he had been handsome and was still distinguished in his manner and courtly in his bearing. He wore a livery of dark blue satin, well rubbed but nowhere frayed, knee breeches and powdered wool, drawn back and braided. Stockings of white silk clothed his long shanks.

The elegance of the room into which the boys were ushered left them ill at ease. They whispered when they spoke. The walls were of walnut with gray damask panels outlined in tarnished gold. The draperies were of unfigured peacock blue velvet. The Kirmanshaw carpet which covered the center of the floor left a wide border of polished oak. The furniture, if not Hepplewhite, showed the Hepplewhite influence, and the chairs were covered in a damask of yellow faded to old gold.

Above the marble mantel hung a large portrait of a tall man of middle years but with sagging jowls and baggy eyelids, like those of the butler. His long right hand rested upon the shoulder of a young black Negro who looked up at him with admiration, and on his left was depicted a handsome but leggy hound with his eyes fixed on his master. There were no other pictures or ornaments. The portrait might have been by Benjamin West, but was somewhat too late for his American period.

The boys did not hear the approach of Mr. Wilson when at length he came, and their backs were toward him. He greeted them with the single word, "Gentlemen."

Old, feeble and palsied, Wilson was still a commanding figure who dominated the room, all of Coign, in fact, and the adjacent landscape. He seemed a monarch. But here was another version of the sagging jowls and the puffy, sagging eyelids of the portrait and of the butler.

"Gentlemen," he repeated. "I demand your pardon. I was sleeping and my servant refused to wake me. Your pardon, suhs."

"Mista Wilson, suh?" Hammond asked.

"The same, suh, at your service."

"I Hammond Maxwell."

"Yes?" asked Wilson, waiting.

"I Hammond Maxwell, son of Mista Warren Maxwell of Falconhurst Plantation."

"You?" the old man asked. "You?" He placed his hand on the boy's shoulder and led him toward a window, stepped back and looked him up and down and focused on his face. He nodded his head and extended his hand. "Well, well. I'm glad to see you, son." He looked at Charles and asked, "And this young man?"

"Charles Woodford, Major Woodford's son, of Crowfoot. I'm goin' to marry me his daughter, the Major's daughter that is, and this Charles ridin' home with me to Falconhurst."

"I am acquainted with the Major—slightly that is; very estimable, I believe," the old man guarded his statement. "I'm glad to see you, suh," he said to Charles; he turned to Hammond, "Congratulations on your approaching marriage. Warren Maxwell will be pleased. You are an only son, I believe? Or is there another?"

"Ain't no other. Ain't nobody but Papa and me," said Hammond.

"He is fortunate, fortunate to have even one son. Fortunate," sighed Wilson. "My eldest son was killed, shot to death in a duel. The younger boy died of the fever. Two boys and four girls, all dead. One of the girls perished in childbirth, the others died young. Warren Maxwell is fortunate."

The old man felt behind him for the seat of the chair on which he was about to drop. "How is Warren Maxwell? How is your papa?"

"He tol'able, except his rheumatiz purty bad. Betterin' though," explained Hammond. "I reckon he right dismal with me away. He worry when I leaves Falconhurst."

"Well he may, well he may. All boys are damned fools, especially if they have any spirit. No knowing what they're doing when you take your eyes off them. You're young?"

"I'm eighteen," Hammond remonstrated. "Nigh on to nineteen. And Papa don't think I a damned fool. He trust me, but he like me with him—jest craves me."

"Don't wonder, don't wonder at all. Must be twelve years or more since I saw Warren. He was much younger than I, much younger, but I liked him. Used to be crazy about black wenches, I remember, or any other color for the matter of that, but the blacker the better. I envied him his youth and vigor. I was already ageing."

"Reckon he still craves 'em, only his rheumatiz—"

"Last time I saw him, he came here and talked me out of as fine a big Mandingo wench as I ever saw and her female child, about three years old and big enough to be five—handsome. I didn't want to sell them, but Warren had to have them—just crazy about Mandingos."

"Still is. That's whut I come fer," declared Hammond.

"Wonder whether he still has that wench and that child? The little one must be big enough to breed, almost."

"Still got ol' Lucy, and Big Pearl we calls the young wench. They fine. Lucy still breedin' and the young one ready. That whut I doin' at Coign Plantation."

Wilson levered himself upright with his hands on the arms of his chair. "Let us retire to the library where there is a fire, and we can talk better there," he suggested. "The evenings get chilly and at my age one likes the heat."

He led the way and Charles put his hand on his arm to guide him.

"Never mind," Wilson resented the aid. "I can still walk alone, a little feebly, but I can still walk."

Despite his protest at Charles' assistance, the aged man submitted to help from the butler who grasped his arm and steadied his way across the hall. Except for the clothes, and that the butler was younger, the two were singularly alike, alike in their bearing as in their stature and in the sag of their faces.

"No good from trying to fight him off," smiled the elder appreciatively as the younger man eased him into a chair. "Bent upon having me helpless. That comes of having a son for a servant; he does what he wants to me and won't take orders. Thinks he knows more than his master."

"You need help, suh," said the servant.

"I know it," resigned the master. "Chairs, gentlemen."

"Do you want your paisley, suh?"

"No, no, let me alone, Ben," replied the pampered old man. "But you might bring us a bottle of that Madeira, please; you know the kind, the Malvasia. The young gentlemen might enjoy it."

"Yes, suh; right away, suh."

The old man nodded in the direction of the exiting slave, and explained, "I wasn't older than you, Mr. Maxwell, no, not so old, when old Ben was born—the first male I ever got and about the best. My get had all been girls before that—at least I believed them mine, although my older brother often poached on my domain and I wasn't sure. Ben's dam was a griffe wench my father had given me for my own use; I think she was his own get. I raised Ben and trained him and he has been faithful. One gets fond of a slave after seventy years. I think Ben is seventy-one or seventy-two. I'm eighty-seven. If you want a good servant, get him yourself and break him to your ways, and you know what you have."

"I kind of plan to sell off my bucks and keep my own wenches. Course, they all little yet, and not many," said Hammond.

"Hold on to a nice, likely buck, too," the old man advised. "It's comforting to have your own when you're old."

Cases of calf-bound books, a few with spines stained or cracked, lined the room, and above the bookcases the varnish over the white paneling had yellowed to tones of old ivory. Behind the four capacious chairs that ranged before the fireplace stretched a substantial table with account books, an ink-

well, feather pens, a sand box, three or four of the calf-bound books for which there were vacancies in the cases, and a standing candelabrum at each end. The saraband rug was worn and the end toward the fire was flecked with small burns and one burn as big as the palm of a woman's hand and of such shape.

Above the walnut mantelpiece, on which rested two or three books, carelessly tossed, and paired candelabra with half burnt candles, hung an expanse of picture of two nude women and a satyr. The women were rounded and buxom and the flesh tints were warm, in the manner of Rubens. It might indeed have been a Rubens, or possibly a copy of a picture by that artist, but, whoever might have painted it, illuminated by the firelight, it dominated the spacious room.

This seemed to be the old man's retreat. It appeared used, even worn. Wilson gazed with caressing appreciation at the picture in the lapses of the conversation.

"Whut I come here fer was—," Hammond began.

"To pay me a visit, I hope, the vicar for old Warren who has long neglected an old friend," Wilson forestalled him from stating his errand. "This old tomb needs the sound of young voices. I could well wish that you might stay a week, a month, a year, as long as you will and listen to the garrulity of an old man."

"We has to git along toward Falconhurst," said Hammond.

"Yes, yes, tomorrow or the day after, or the day after that. Meanwhile, to worry will do Warren good, teach him patience, give him to know what it means to have a son, how precious a son can be," and Wilson bent forward at the cost of some energy and reached out to pat Hammond on his stiffened knee.

"I don't crave that Papa should fret none about me. Papa count on me."

Ben returned with a dust laden bottle and three glasses on a tray which he set carefully upon the table so as not to disturb the wine. He wiped the bottle on a napkin, tenderly, inserted the corkscrew and pulled the cork, raised the bottle gently to his nostrils to appraise the bouquet, and decanted the wine directly to the glasses. He passed the salver first to his master, next to Charles, lastly to Hammond, with a manner like that of a sovereign bestowing decorations.

His owner passed the wine back and forth under his nose, savored a short sip of it and nodded to the slave. He raised his glass toward Hammond and proposed a toast, "To Warren Maxwell and to his son who is like him," and then, as a polite afterthought, he added, bowing in Charles' direction, "And to Major Woodford and his son, suh." He tasted the wine again, and smacked. "How do you like it, gentlemen?"

Charles downed half his glass at a gulp before he took his cue from Hammond, who had taken his from his host, who sipped and savored and smelled the sweet headiness while he gazed at the nudes above the mantel.

"It good, but I not knowin' whut is it. I never had none like this afore

now," said Hammond candidly.

"It is Madeira—Malmsey; one learns to like the sweet stuff," Wilson said. "You may have some, Ben. Get you a glass."

"Thank you, suh. I wondered."

"Wondered? Why?"

"You always give me a glass, suh, when you have Malmsey."

"Of course, but be careful of the lees. The lees spoil it." The old man devoted himself to the enjoyment of his wine and said nothing until his glass was empty.

Hammond was anxious to transact his business. His mind was upon Falconhurst and he was anxious to get home. He liked his ancient host but felt himself remiss to squander time. He failed to fathom the old man's motive in his avoidance of the discussion of the mission, which was in fact merely to prolong Hammond's stay. Wilson had not expected guests, but his pleasure in entertaining them was dampened by the dread of their early departure.

Hammond tried again. "Whut I come here fer, Mista Wilson, suh, was you got an ol' Mandingo buck an' Papa craves you to borrow the buck to him to breed them two wenches."

"The two you got from me? Warren knows that old buck was the sire of both of them, the young one in-bred to him already."

"Yas, suh, Mista Wilson. Papa know that, but he don't know nobody else who gotten a Mandingo, a pure and sure one. He craves to try it again, craves you to borrow him the buck. Won't take long, and Papa will pay you."

"Nonsense. Pay? Nonsense. But I haven't that buck. He's dead. A bull gored him about three months ago and old Xerxes died. I thought he was going to pull through, but he died. I don't know whether he would be any good to you, anyway, for he was getting old. I hadn't put a wench to him in ten years. Might have been fertile, but he got careless with the bull."

"Papa had laid store," said Hammond, betraying his own disappointment.

"Warren Maxwell and his Mandingos! He is Mandingo mad!"

"Mighty sweet niggers; I likes 'em, too," Ham defended his father.

"Of course you do; you've been taught to," said Wilson. "But there are Mandingos and Mandingos. I have known Mandingos that weren't worth killing, although they are admittedly hard to kill. They are tough. I was fortunate with the bozals I got—just damned fool lucky—and fortunate in the progeny they produced. The original pair were big handsome varmints; old Xerxes was the original buck. They were related somehow, cousins or had the same father, maybe the same mother, too. They tried to tell me their kinship, but never could make it clear; possibly it wasn't clear even to them."

"That makes Big Pearl more bred-in even than Papa knowin'; even Lucy was bred-in, seems like."

"No telling how far back the incest may go. I think it's time to stop it. Of course, I know that it results in progeny of exceptional excellence or of more

exceptional degeneration. There is no middle ground. It produces paragons or monsters—nobody knows why," Wilson expounded. "That seems to be the reason kings are likely to be dolts or geniuses—more of them dolts; men or maniacs—more of them maniacs."

"But, Big Pearl and Lucy?" Hammond refused to be diverted. "Whut we goin' to do?"

"I'd look about for a good Mandingo buck of another strain, one quite unrelated," suggested Wilson, but without conviction. "Where? I don't know."

"Folks says they is plenty in Cuba," despaired Hammond.

"In Cuba, yes. But smuggling Negroes is dangerous, unless you are in the business as a business and bribe the authorities to let your contraband through. It doesn't pay to smuggle a single buck; and, anyway, you should see the buck."

The subject bored Charles. "Ain't you got no buck niggers at all? A buck's a buck. Don't make no difference. Whut you craves is a sucker, ain't it?"

"The sire makes a great deal of difference, young man," said the old man. "By all means, never breed a Mandingo to a member of another tribe. Keep the stock pure. A hybrid cross with a Mandingo, a Mandingo mule, as I call it, is treacherous, untrustworthy, unpredictable, a renegade and a killer. Such a mule may have the Mandingo size and vigor, doesn't always but may have them, but let it get to breeding age and you have a bad nigger on your hands. Half the bad niggers you hear about have Mandingo blood somewhere, not pure, of course, but mixed up with Guinea or Hausa or Angola or something else. And the wenches are as bad as the bucks—worse. It is possible to break a bad buck; a bad wench is bad till she dies."

"That whut Papa say. That why he craves your old buck fer them wenches."

"He's right. A pure Mandingo is playful as a kitten, game as a painter, strong as a bull elephant. A half Mandingo is a viper, a viper, suh. Now, I'll tell you, I have the brother of that Pearl—do you call her?"

"Big Pearl, yas, suh."

"I have the full brother of Big Pearl, from Lucy bred back to Xerxes. He is about three years, nearly four, older than Pearl. Handsome an animal as ever you saw—bigger, finer all over than Xerxes. Just one thing wrong with him; you can't breed him."

"You mean he ain't got no sap in him?" Ham clarified.

"He's got plenty of sap, as you say, probably too much; but he is too big. He got up to around breeding age and begged me to give him a wench and I had Ben call in the biggest, most experienced, old wench on the place, one that had had twelve or fifteen lusty young, and turned this young Mede in to her. She was pleased as he was, although she was beyond child bearing, but he was so big, and hurt her so much, and she screamed so loud, that I pulled the boy right off of her, afraid he would tear her and ruin her. I've tried him a time or two more with other wenches, but I fear that

he will live a virgin all of his life unless I can get him a cow elephant." Wilson chuckled with aged laughter. "A good thing, perhaps, but too much of it."

"Big Pearl sure big, and I knows," averred Ham; "and you knows Lucy."

"No, I don't, not in that way, or, if I once knew, I have forgotten," the old man deliberately added fresh implication to Ham's statement. "If you want to take this Mede along with you and let your papa look at him and try him, you're welcome to do so. That is, if Mede wants to go, and he will want to."

"I'd have to keep him until May, when I come back to Crowfoot fer my weddin'."

"That's all right. Keep him as long as you like. When you are through with him, write him a pass, give him a package of pone and turn him loose. He'll come home. There's only one thing."

"Yas, suh."

"Mede is mortgaged, in the amount of fifteen hundred dollars, I think—it may be only twelve hundred—and a couple of year's interest. The whole of The Coign is mortgaged and every stick of furniture and every slave. The mortgages are all mature and interest is delinquent, and I am just living here on the sufferance of the Jew, who refuses to kick an old man out and is waiting for me to die to foreclose upon his property. Jew Wertheimer of Mobile, no matter what folks may say about Jews, Jew Wertheimer is a white man. If you want to borrow money, don't bother around with the white bankers, but go to Mobile and see this Jew Wertheimer. As I was saying, if Mede should die or even be crippled while he is in your possession, you'd have to pay off the mortgage on him. I wouldn't want the Jew to stand the loss, after his leniency to me, and I should be unable to pay him."

"Of course, that all right. Papa do that, of course. I'll give you a writin' about it."

"No writing required, just a clear understanding. If Warren Maxwell's boy isn't good for a dead nigger, my faith in human nature dies and I might as well die with it. I haven't lived eighty-seven years without learning to know men, especially when I know their breeding—and you can't deny yours. Maybe you'd like to see this Mandingo buck."

"I'd thank you, suh. Sure would like to see that Mandingo."

"Is he a fightin' nigger?" Charles asked.

"Cain't you never think about nothin' but fightin', Charles?" demanded Hammond.

"Ben, oh Ben," Wilson called, pounding on the floor with the poker to summon the butler, who appeared immediately. "Round up that Ganymede and bring him in here."

"Whut you call that boy, Mista Wilson? Ganymede; whut kind of name is that?" Hammond asked.

"I usually call him Mede. I carry him in the books and on the mortgage as Ganymede."

"That whut I take you to say. Whut it mean?"

"Well, to tell it without blushing, Zeus, the sovereign god of the Greeks, saw a boy named Ganymede and fell so in love with him that he sent a great eagle to steal the boy and to carry him off in its talons to Mount Olympus where the boy served Zeus as a cup bearer, that is he poured his wine, and for other purposes."

"Other purposes? Whut other purposes?"

"Well, other purposes—whatever Zeus wanted."

"An eagle carried him? Could an eagle tote this buck of yourn?"

"It is a matter of irony."

"Whut that?"

"Oh, just call him Mede. You'll see him."

The door opened and Ben asked, "Ready for Mede, suh?"

"Yes, let him come in," replied the master.

Mede bounded in and filled the room, which was not large enough to give him scope. He bounded, not that he leapt indecorously, but his legs seemed made of springs over which he had no control. The excitement of being summoned into the house produced such a tonicity in his muscles that it was impossible to keep them still. The gestures of his arms threatened to wreck the furniture of the room, but he disturbed nothing. He stomped like a stallion and yet maintained the dignity of a potentate. Some six feet, two or three inches, he seemed taller than he was. It may be that the age and weakness of the master served as a foil to the youth and vigor of the slave. He seemed incapable of fear, and his subservience to his kindly master was the subservience of devotion.

"Mede, come here," was hardly uttered when the boy was across the floor, standing docile but nervous in front of the old man's chair.

Hammond noticed that his skin was not dead black but a deep, warm brown, like polished walnut, with vague hints of red in the cheeks. His eyes were spaced wide in his broad face, but within the temples, flush with the cheeks and without much overhang to the brow of the low forehead. The bridge of the nose was not quite flat and the enormous round nostrils were animated by the boy's breathing. The great draughts of air which he inspired fluttered the wings of the nostrils with their expulsion. His breathing, which appeared to be effortfully conscious, was but the suppliance of a mighty bellows. The large, regular teeth were yellow and bone-like behind the wide opening which formed the thick lipped but not protruding mouth. The lower jaw was massive and square. A mat of kinky, coarse wool grew low and formed a straight line across the forehead.

The head was barbaric. It was like some rough hewn sculpture, some great unfinished carving, devoid of detail, a head so powerful, so primitive as to inspire fear—except for the eyes, black, long-lashed, and benignant, confident eyes, confident both in the ability to defend themselves against all the world and confident in the world against which no defense was needed. The

eyes rested on their master with what seemed like adoration.

"Mede, step out of your clothes and show these gentlemen what you have." The command was modulated into a request. "They won't mind a little musk, if Ben didn't give you time to wash yourself."

"Masta, are you planning to sell me?" Mede asked with interest but without alarm.

"No such luck," scoffed the master. "You know damned well, Mede, that I wouldn't sell you without asking you."

"You need money, Masta, and I'm worth a good price. It's all right with me if you want to sell me." Mede was kneeling to unbuckle his shoes.

"I'll do the worrying around The Coign about getting all of us something to eat, boy, and I won't have to sell you either. I don't eat my slaves. The reason I'd like to sell you is to know what is going to happen to you, to get you a good master before I die."

"I knows that, Masta."

"God damn it, stop that nigger talk. You grew up to speak English," the first harshness the master had shown.

"I know, Masta," Mede corrected himself contritely.

"That's better."

"Yes, suh. Let the old niggers, Ben and the others, worry about new masters. I'll bring too much money on the block for a new masta to treat me bad." Mede cast aside his shirt and stepped out of his pants.

Hammond nodded his head in approval. "A right purty boy," he said. "Looks like Big Pearl, too, even bigger. Right purty," he repeated.

Soundness was not in question, but Hammond rose to run exploratory hands over the boy's shoulders and arms, stroked his thighs, lifted his genitals and smiled his admiration. Hammond knew a fine Negro when he looked at one; no tactile examination was needed, but he yearned to confirm his appraisal with his hands. He derived an added satisfaction from contact with the flesh. It was as if he deemed soundness, strength, beauty to be contagious, and that he would absorb some of those attributes by touching one who had them.

Wilson knew the feeling, too. He realized the pleasure Hammond took from seeing so magnificent an animal, and, connoisseur himself, sensed Hammond's speechless appreciation. Ham merely looked at the old man and nodded.

"Thought perhaps you'd like him. Young, not at his best even yet, but a better buck than his sire. Think Warren would want to use him?"

"Papa sure would admire to see him. Just whut he cravin' fer Lucy and Big Pearl. He splendiferous," answered Hammond.

Ganymede, aware of his own magnificence, made the most of it. He flexed his muscles, twisted his body from side to side, stooped and rose. His face was imperturbable, but white admiration stirred his ego.

"Mede, squat down there and listen to me," said his master. "Mr. Max-

well, here, is—or, rather, Mr. Maxwell's father is an old friend of mine."

"Yes, suh," Mede said.

"He wants to keep the breed pure. Mr. Maxwell wants to borrow you for stock, and I'd like to accommodate him. What do you say? Do you want to go with him, and come back when you get those wenches in foal or when he's ready to send you back?"

"Yes, suh, Masta. I do what you say."

"I know you do. You'd better," the master laughed. "But do you want to go? Nobody is going to make you."

"I want to go; yes, suh. But do you reckon I could? I haven't never done it before, you know. I'm pretty big. You took me off of old Celia and wouldn't let me." The Negro looked downward at himself.

"Mr. Maxwell's wenches are big, he says. I guess you can cover them all right. We'll let Mr. Maxwell decide that. Do you want to go? That's the question."

"What you say, Masta. When do we start?"

"I'll tell you later. Mr. Maxwell will stay here a few days. I'll tell you. Now, take your rags and go back to the quarters."

Mede threw his shirt and trousers over his arm and stooped to gather his shoes.

"Wait," Ham interposed. "Mista Wilson, would you sell this buck?"

The old man hesitated before he answered. "You'd want him for yourself and not to sell again?" he asked.

Mede looked at Wilson, then at Hammond, and again at Wilson. He trusted his master, but was no indifferent spectator of his destiny. He dropped his clothes upon the floor and stood waiting.

"Wants him to keep." Hammond explained. "Fact is, I wants him fer a fighter. I ben lookin' around. Kin he fight, do you reckon?"

"Sure kin. Sure kin fight," Charles interposed. The very word excited him. "Buy him; why don't you?"

"I don't know," said Wilson. "He's strong enough. When old Xerxes was gored, the young one grabbed hold of that bull's horns and broke its neck. It was like wringing a chicken. But fighting? Mede doesn't get mad—I never saw him mad. Maybe it's because he always had his way, allowed to do as he pleased. Get him mad and he could fight, no doubt about it. Can you fight, Mede?"

"Who you want me to whip? What for?" the Negro asked, with a show of interest, even of alacrity. "Yes, suh, I can fight. Yes, suh."

"I've heard something about this recent sport of fighting bucks, but I never saw a main of it. Something we didn't do in my days," said Wilson. "Must be exciting as a horse race, but dangerous. I'd hate to have Mede ruined in a fight."

"All the young gen'lemen has their fightin' boys," explained Hammond.

"I ben a-cravin' one. Papa say I should buy me one, but buy a good one, one that kin whup."

"This here one is good. He kin win for us. Whyn't you buy him?"

"Don't know yet does Mista Wilson crave to sell him," Hammond answered.

"Yes, I'd sell him—to you," Wilson conceded. "That is, provided the boy wants to go. Think you want to, Mede? Want to be Mr. Maxwell's fighting nigger?"

"And have those wenches all the time?" the Negro stipulated.

"Well, when we not readyin' fer a fight. Won't have you wearin' yourse'f out a-pesterin' wenches," Hammond made clear.

"Wouldn't hurt him none," Charles interposed, and was ignored.

"Mr. Maxwell will treat you well. Good food and plenty. Of course, things will not be the same as here. You would have to find Mr. Maxwell's ways and follow them; obey him. What do you say? I can't live much longer, and it is better than being sold on the block to you don't know whom."

"It is better," Mede agreed.

"How much you want fer him, Mr. Wilson, suh?" asked Hammond.

"I don't know. I just don't know. Mede is a sort of fancy nigger—something special that ought to bring a good figure. As I said, the Jew in Mobile lent me twelve or fifteen hundred on him—I don't remember the exact amount—and you know what that means he's worth," the owner speculated. "No telling what such a boy would bring in the market, but to you, to your father, to a good home where he won't be abused and overworked—is three thousand dollars out of the way? Is it too much?"

"I reckon he worth it. A right purty boy." Hammond hesitated. He reached out and pulled Mede toward him. "Kneel down," he commanded. He had forgotten to examine the teeth.

"Find anything wrong with him after you get him home, or if Warren doesn't like him, turn him loose and tell him to come back to The Coign. There'll be no hard feeling," Wilson specified.

"Papa will cotton onto him, all right," said Hammond, stroking the black shoulder.

"That's too much," Wilson decided. "Can't bleed the son of an old friend. I said three thousand; make it twenty-seven hundred and fifty. That's better. That's enough. That's all any nigger is worth."

"I'll come back next week and git him," Ham promised. "I ain't got that much—not with me. I'll come, sure. You won't sell this buck to somebody else, Mista Wilson, suh?"

"Don't talk nonsense. Take him along. Take him with you. You can send the money."

Mede rose to his feet, again picked up his clothes, then sank to his knees before the old man's chair, embracing Wilson with his arms and burying his face against his chest. He was convulsed with sobs.

"What's the matter, Mede? I asked you first, before I sold you. There, there. Mr. Maxwell will release us from my bargain. You won't have to go. Get up."

Mede clung to Wilson the tighter. "It's best," he said. "I want to go. I want a wench. I want to fight. But I love The Coign. I love you, Masta. You're so good, Masta, suh, and so old. I love you."

Wilson ran his fragile fingers through the wool of the great black head and patted it gently. Then he loosened the boy's hold on him and pushed him away. Tears gathered in his eyes, but he did not wipe them away. He looked out the window as Mede rose and for the third time gathered his clothes.

"That's all, Masta?"

"That's all, Mede. You can go now. That is, unless your masta, your new masta, has orders for you."

"No, I reckon not," said Ham. "You kin go. Be ready in the mornin', early like."

The silence that ensued after the Negro had gone was broken by Charles. "He right powerful buck. We carry him to town and fight him next Sat'day? Eh, Cousin Hammond?"

"We trains him first. We got to learn him and toughen him."

Ben entered with an armload of wood for the fire, and discharged it. As he brushed the ashes that littered the hearth, nobody spoke. He rose to go.

"I sold Mede, Ben," his master announced.

"Sold Mede? I didn't think you'd do that, suh. Then The Coign is breaking up. We'll all go soon."

"Yes, we'll all go soon," echoed the master.

"Supper will be ready right away, suh. We're having a haunch of venison, that young doe that Old Frank shot up by the wood lot."

"Ought not to shoot does. Let 'em live and breed. Tell Frank not to shoot does," said Wilson.

CHAPTER 13

"WE go to bed early at The Coign. Not much else to do. Reading by candlelight, hard on the eyes, although I want to go through Propertius once more, just once more, before I die," Wilson declared, pushing back his chair from the supper table and draining the port from his glass. "So you think you must go tomorrow? Wish I could bid you tarry. Not many persons come to The Coign any more, and no young persons. It's been pleasant."

"Papa will be waitin'. We got to go, got to start early. Reckon that buck kin keep up with our horses?"

"May slacken your speed a little. You aim to stop the night? Don't plan to ride right through? It's more than sixty miles, nearer seventy."

"We'll stop. Don't want to use up the horses, never mind the boy," said Hammond.

"Don't lash Mede. He'll run as fast as he can without the whip."

"I haven't got no snake with me. I don't aim to whup him along. We'll slow up first," Ham promised.

"You'll want wenches for the night, I suspect," Wilson proposed. "I haven't forgotten when I was young."

"Not needful, suh. Really not needful. I plenty tired out from ridin' all the way from Crowfoot," Hammond made a polite protest.

"And you, suh?" the old man turned to Charles. "You're not too young to wrestle with a healthy wench? I have no desire to corrupt youth."

Charles looked at his plate with embarrassment. "I has a wench at home, suh. My papa given her to me."

"Well, well, I supposed so," said Wilson, "Ben, are those three girls ready? Bring 'em in and let the young gentlemen take their choice."

"That Lutitia can't come, suh. It's her time, her time of the month, suh," Ben explained.

"Well, bring the two," Wilson commanded. "I've been waiting for some personable young white men for these girls. Except for their brother, their half brother, I have no young buck for them and I do not feel like putting them to a worn out old man. They're too nice. Fact is, they're fancies."

"Virgins?" inquired Charles.

"I fear they are, if there's value in virginity. I'll have to impose on you to relieve them of it."

Ellen and Edna had been waiting in the kitchen for this summons. They edged their way through the door in Ben's wake and took places in the shadows beside it. Edna smothered a giggle with her hand. Both were enveloped in starched frocks that reached the floor.

"Come here, my dears, and let the gentlemen look at you," commanded Wilson extending his hand in invitation.

Ellen followed by Edna came forward with a show of reluctance and stood beside their master's chair. Both looked steadily at the floor. He grasped Ellen's hand and patted it.

"You're virgin, aren't you, Ellen. That is, you are pure—you never had a man. Isn't that so?" the master inquired.

Ellen nodded.

"These gentlemen, Mr. Maxwell and Mr. Woodford, want you to sleep with them—in their beds. You know what that means, don't you?"

Ellen blushed and nodded again, and Edna suppressed another giggle.

"You want to do it? You're sure?"

"Whatever Masta says," assented Ellen. The assent of the other was silence.

"It will hurt. You know that," warned Wilson.

"I know," said Ellen. She spoke for both.

Edna stole a coy glance at Charles and dropped her head again.

"You gentlemen will have to decide between yourselves which is for which. There is little to choose, I judge. Come around and let the gentlemen look at you, Ellen."

Hammond's indifference was real. "Either," he said.

"I likes the little 'un, the light 'un. I'd sooner have her," Charles declared without reticence.

"These two and the other one are the only young wenches I have left. I had a young overseer at The Coign for a couple of seasons about sixteen or seventeen years ago—a good looking, well set up youth, named Hall, Willis Hall. White trash, I suppose, but he made good cotton crops. The wenches on the plantation were all crazy for him, and he just as crazy for them. I didn't have a good light stock buck at the time, and so I let this Hall have his way. He sired these two, another girl, and a nice little buck, besides four or five others that died as suckers or a little later. His get was all pretty, but frail, not puny but just frail. Too much of what I call quality. Don't know why; he was a staver, himself, a vigorous bastard who could drive a gang of choppers all day and fornicate all night, and relish one as much as the other. Not very big, but handsome and full of sap. Damn nearly ruined the bucks; worked 'em to death, but the cotton he made was worth more than the niggers he killed. I'd have him yet, I suppose, but he got religion, took to praying all over the plantation, finally wound up with a craving to preach. He had visions of some kind, said he heard the Lord calling him to gather sinners. One month he wouldn't touch a wench; the next month he was at them worse than ever. I think the call to preach was a mere satiety with yellow flesh and a craving for white women; niggers no longer good enough for him. He left, and I haven't had any luck with overseers since, nor a fair crop of cotton."

"Willis Hall? That was the preacher at Benson last year, till he got into some kind of a scrape," said Hammond.

"I hear of him around, now and again. Made quite a preacher," said

Wilson. "Woman scrape, I guess?"

"No, somethin' about him and another feller from Natchez tryin' to steal a nigger. We'd a hung him if we had proof. Way it come out, they jest run him off."

"Well, Hall was the sire of these two. I think you may like them." Wilson got to his feet. "Ben will tell you where the gentlemen will sleep, young women; be sure you're clean."

The old man's show of his ability to walk back to the library was valiant, but Ben was at his side and before he was more than halfway across the hall Wilson submitted to the butler's assistance. Hammond slowed his pace to that of his host. Charles, before he left the dining room, scurried around the table for a closer inspection of Edna. He felt her breasts through her dress, passed his hand across her buttock, and raised her skirt to feel the contour of her calf, which he failed to evaluate as stringy and flat. His survey was hurried and surreptitious that he might rejoin his host without being missed. He knew that his delay did not escape Hammond's disapproving notice, but saw no harm in his curiosity. Neither did Edna. She shrank in what she fancied to be modesty from the boy's touch, but was in fact flattered by his interest. Her titter was pleased embarrassment.

Ellen stepped away from her sister to avoid the comparison that the youth might see fit to make. She was afraid of the unenthusiastic man whom it was her lot to amuse. She evaluated Hammond as austere, perhaps peremptory, even harsh; but she was determined to please him; she willed to like him. He had scantly glanced at her, but his indifference only augmented her zest for him. He was young and he was white. She had seen few white men, and it was more from hearsay than from observation that she knew them to be unpredictable.

Ben eased his aged master into his accustomed chair beside the fire, filled and brought him his pipe, lighting it with a sliver of wood which he ignited from the fire. "This is all," he said. "When you finish this smoke, it will be time for bed."

"I'll go," the master acquiesced. "The gentlemen will indulge my age with their pardon for deserting them. I'd like to talk awhile, but the aged must sleep—not that I won't sleep soon enough and long enough. But Ben, here, decrees it."

"We doesn't crave to discommode you, suh," Hammond answered. "We's tired, our own self."

"I not tired. Ain't done nothin' 'ceptin' ride," Charles protested, and Ham looked at him with disapproval.

"Stay by the fire as long as you like. Ben will provide what you may need. The Coign is yours," said Wilson generously. "We have no inducements for youth, but I selfishly wish I might urge you to prolong your sojourn."

"Papa waitin' at home with two hundert lazy niggers eatin' they heads off.

Papa won't work 'em, cain't with his rheumatiz and all. We must git along, suh."

"You want to begin training Mede, doubtless, too. The run beside your horses ought to harden his leg muscles—but don't overtax him at first. You may find him soft; his duties here have been light."

"Seem hard to me," said Charles eagerly. "Don't need no breakin', seem like. Ready to fight right now; will be, come Sat'day."

"You'll find Mede biddable, never sulky, never need the whip. But he's proud, Mandingo pride. Break his pride, break his heart. That's why I believe he will make into a good fighter. Pride. Too proud to admit defeat. Feed his pride as you feed his body. Flatter him."

Hammond nodded.

"And about feeding his body, Mede eats. It is impossible to overfeed him. That restlessness of his, that vitality, that pawing the ground burns up energy. Feed and sleep and hard work is all he needs to keep him happy. Of course, he is at an age that needs a wench. I hope the one for which Warren wants him can take him. It will quiet him down. I wouldn't tell him that it's his sister, not that I think it would make any difference to Mede. No knowing what prejudices he may have learned in the quarters."

"I won't tell him," Hammond agreed.

"Just one other thing. You have to watch Mede's bowels. He neglects himself. Ask him about them. A Mandingo won't lie. A good castor oiling once or twice a month won't hurt him, although heavy work may regulate him."

"I'll remember whut you says," declared the new owner; "specially the feedin'. We always eats our niggers good and plenty. Papa believe in keepin' young bucks a-growin'. But I plans to give a fightin' nigger white vittles, sweet milk and meat and sweetnin'."

"And eggs, raw eggs," Wilson suggested. "Nothing makes a nigger shine like raw eggs."

"Don't it learn 'em to suck? Papa don't want no egg-suckin' scoun'rels around."

"Give them eggs and they won't have to steal them. Raw. Some niggers don't like them raw, but pour them into them anyway if you want to prime them."

"Your bedtime, Masta, suh," announced Ben. "Come along now, please, suh. Time to go up."

"Well, orders are orders, gentlemen," the old man sighed resignedly. "Ben will take care of you. I trust you enjoy those wenches, but no obligation. A few more months of virginity won't hurt them; no obligation. Good night. Ben will show you up when you're ready." As he spoke, the butler's hand under his arm helped him to rise.

Hammond rose and beckoned to Charles to do likewise. Wilson extended his hand to Charles first. As he clasped Hammond's hand, he said, "Bless

you for coming, my boy. You're like your papa. You won't forget to give him my compliments."

After the door was closed, Hammond heard the old man cursing the butler for assisting him, but he accepted the support with gratitude if not with grace.

"Don't do no harm to cod the old man," Charles remarked, sinking back into his chair.

"About whut?"

" 'Bout takin' care of that buck, feedin' him, and makin' him shit, and like that. How he reckon you goin' to make him fight without snakin' him? Got to make 'em afeared. Old man don't know nothin' 'bout fightin' niggers. He never fit no niggers."

"Mista Wilson's fergot more than we knows; has had more niggers than we ever seen. Look at all these books; he's read 'em."

"They about niggers? How to fight 'em?"

"Not 'tirely, I reckon. 'Bout lots of things. Some of 'em in lingo we doesn't un'erstand, cain't read."

"Whut's the good of 'em? Prob'ly like the Bible that Mamma reads outn. Nobody know whut it means." Charles spat in the fire and changed the subject.

"That wench, that Edna, seem pretty good. Virgin, too, he say. Breasts not very big; but they good and firm like. Better'n yourn, I bet. Better'n Katy."

"You understand you not to whup her like you done to Katy las' night," Hammond instructed Charles. "She Mr. Wilson's, and he wouldn't like it. You seein' he treat his niggers kind."

"Got to learn niggers to love you, to look up to you. Besides, I likes to. Dick, my brother you know, he always touches up a wench aforehand. Not to hurt her, you un'erstan', jest to make her beg."

"Never mind Dick. You behave. That's all. You don't behave, and I gits you to Falconhurst, I'll pull off your clothes and lambaste you jest like a nigger."

"I a white man. You cain't whup me. I won't let you."

"You white, then ac' white. Your papa say thresh you and you don't behave, and I will."

"I'll behave, but not because you sayin'."

Ben opened the door. "Want for anything, gentlemen?"

"Only to go to bed," said Hammond. "Take us up, when you are ready."

"Then come with me, suh," said the old butler, whose dignity begot deference. "This way, gentlemen." More than ever, he seemed a replica of his master, younger and more vigorous, but the same in manner, even in mannerisms.

At the head of the stairs he threw open a door and bowed. "For the younger gentleman," he said. "I think you will find all you need, suh; but I

shall return." Farther down the hall, he showed Hammond into a corner room, lighted by six candles in two candelabra.

Hammond looked around at the elegance, the didoed paper and the tester bed curtained with silk damask, before he saw Ellen, risen from her chair. No fire burned in the fireplace, which was small and looked as if it had never been used.

The butler apologized for the musty smell that permeated the room. "I had wished you to sleep in another room, freshly aired, but the Master designated this larger apartment too late, and I did not wish to admit the night air, suh," he said. "Here is a fresh nightcap, if you care for one, and there are additional covers on this chair if the weather turns cold. It feels like rain coming on."

"Don't fret yourse'f," Hammond said.

"The wench's name is Ellen. I trust you find her comfortable, suh. She's fat, too fat. But you were not expected, suh. We could have starved her down for you."

"She'll do all right," said Hammond, ignoring the girl and untying his stock.

"You'll find her backward, not broken to the bed, but she is biddable. She'll obey, suh."

"I know."

"I'll bring the warming pan before you're ready for bed," said the butler, inclining his body.

Hammond sat upon the bed. "You'll got to he'p me off with my boot," he said to Ellen. "I'm cripped, you knows."

"Yes, suh; I know, Masta," Ellen said, advancing and kneeling before Hammond and reaching forward for his foot.

"Don't be afeared, Ellen. I ain't a-goin' to eat you up."

"I'm not afraid, Masta," but Ellen was afraid, afraid more of herself than of Hammond. She succeeded in drawing off his boots before she burst into tears.

"Everythin' all right, nigger. Don't cry. You not want a crip to pester you, you don' have to. You kin go, time you gits my clothes off. I not very horny, noways."

"It's not that, Masta. I just don't know how. Don't know how you wants me, suh. I want to please you, suh."

"Of course you pleases me. You pleases me right good, firs' rate." Hammond rose to his stockinged feet and lifted and embraced the girl.

They were standing so when Ben returned with the pan of coals to warm the bed. "Wench won't strip, suh?" he asked, and before Hammond could reply he placed the warming pan on the hearth, yanked the buttons from the dress of the unresistant girl and her frock dropped to the floor. "Get them into the big house and they grow coy, act as if they thought a gentleman never saw a naked wench." Ben gave the girl's buttock a smart slap with his palm

"Fat," he said; "we'll have to work it off. Breasts slow, too, suh; not ripe yet."

Ellen shrank from the old man, as she raised her dropped eyes in a hasty glance at Hammond's face.

"She jist right. I likes 'em plump like. She tittied right good fer a virgin," Hammond came to the girl's defense. "Nice limbs, too, not stringy like," he added, stooping to run his hand in appraisal over Ellen's calf. Ben's disparagement of the wench dissipated Hammond's indifference to her beauty and aroused his interest in her.

"Perhaps you will find her comfortable, suh. May have to be firm. Use her like your own, suh," Ben had taken up the warming pan and was passing it slowly backward and forward between the sheets. He released the curtains and drew them along the sides of the bed, leaving a space between them through which to enter it. "If you need me," he added, "I sleep on the floor outside the Masta's chamber, which is next to this one."

"I ain't a-goin' to need you. The wench is all right."

"Shall I relieve you of your clothes?"

"Ellen will help me," replied Hammond, irritated by the correctness of Ben's manner. The preciseness of the slave's speech annoyed him; it made him conscious of the shortcomings of his own. He was relieved when the butler said good night and left the room.

Hammond sat in a low chair and submitted to Ellen as she stripped his clothes from him, careful not to touch his flesh. Her head was down and Hammond was unaware that she was weeping until she stifled a sob.

"Whut the matter, Ellen?" he asked. "You ac' like a white lady, cryin' an' all. Don't you know you ain't nothin' but a nigger? You don' like me, you doesn't have to stay." Hammond sought awkwardly to console the girl.

"I like you, Masta. I like you. Please let me stay, just tonight, just one night. I know I'm not pretty enough for your bed. I'm fat and I'm ugly, but I'll try." She was on her knees before him, and, chary as she had been of contact with his person as she removed his clothes, she lunged impetuously forward, embraced his body and planted her cheek firmly against his belly.

Ellen's misgivings about her beauty were not justified. Her figure, it is true, was plump but not lumpy; her breasts were immature but they were firm and the pink nipples stood erect in the blue veined vellum of her skin. Her large brown eyes were shaded by long lashes and stood well apart in her oval face with its low cheekbones. There was a shallow cleft in her chin, and only the slight fullness of her lips hinted her Negro origin. While her skin was dark, her color would not have betrayed that origin, for she was lighter than many white women, lighter by two shades than Cousin Beatrix.

To Hammond, Negro, whatever its attenuation, was Negro, but he entertained no scruples against contact with it. He did not relish the musk, which he considered racial, but Ellen emitted none. What odor she had was clean and slightly pungent, feminine, but hardly detectable.

Her gesture aroused Hammond's compassion and he lifted her into his arms and kissed her with a pity that turned to passion. He was taken aback to realize what he had done. In his code, a wench was for fornication, not for dalliance. Only the previous night, he had been shocked at the display of Charles' affection for Katy. Perhaps his code needed revision. At the kiss, his blood quickened, his flesh tingled, his tumescence increased, and his indifference vanished.

He turned down the covers. "You crawl in," he said, "while I kneels down."

"But the candles?"

"Reckon I cain't snuff 'em?"

CHAPTER 14

"I DON'T like this weather. Rain sure before evening," his host hopefully greeted Hammond at breakfast. "Better wait another day."

"I used to weather, thank you, suh. That Charles up yet? Will you rouse him out of bed, Ben? That boy sleep all morning and us a-startin' out."

Hammond took his place at the table and helped himself to ham and eggs.

"Sleep well, Mr. Maxwell? Your wench happy?" Wilson inquired perfunctorily. Neither question required an answer.

The latter one opened a subject which Hammond was reluctant to broach. "That wench, Mista Wilson," he began. "Well, would you sell Ellen?"

"Sell Ellen?" the host chuckled. "I suppose then you were pleased with her. Remember, she'll never be the same again. Maidenheads don't grow back again."

"I never took Ellen's."

"No? She was difficult? You were strange to her. I regret—"

"Wasn't no fault of Ellen. She begged me, but I wants her mine—all of her—before I rapes her. Won't you sell her to me?" the youth explained.

"I suppose Ellen is as safe with you as with anybody, my boy, safer. She's too pretty. It's her misfortune. She's a fancy girl, and will go to some sporting gentleman who will use her awhile and sell her again. I'd like you to have her. Did you consult Ellen?"

"She say she like me a kinda lot. She want to go with me. Will you sell her to me, suh? Ellen willin'."

"What will you give? What offer?"

"Whut you say, suh, Mista Wilson. However much you asts. But I wants to take her right along with me, if you please. I kin leave that Mandingo buck and come back fer him and bring you the money. But I wants to take Ellen. How much you wants?" Hammond in his urgency left himself vulnerable.

Ellen's owner was fortunately less interested in the price than in the buyer. He closed his eyes and the boy thought that he had dropped off to sleep. His lids fluttered and opened. "Um, fifteen hundred, I suppose. I know she would bring more after I'm gone, but fifteen hundred will do nicely."

"Thank you, suh. That ain't enough hardly."

"It's enough. If Warren doesn't like her, you can pass her on at a profit."

"Papa, he goin' t' like her. He got to like her. He got to," Hammond reiterated.

"If you don't take that cherry before you get Ellen home, Warren will. His rheumatism isn't that bad, I warrant."

"Then Ellen mine, and I kin take her along?"

"Yes, and I want to send her brother as a present to Warren."

"I'll buy him offen you, an' Ellen wants him," Hammond offered.

"No, I want to give him to Warren Maxwell, want to know that he will not be sold. Warren wouldn't sell a present."

"Mighty kin' of you, suh. But—niggers are worth money, suh. You could sell—"

"I know, but this young buck is different—sound and healthy, but frail, thin skinned—like all the get of that Hall. Not built right for heavy work—delicate, more like a wench, too pretty for a buck."

"But Papa don't—"

"I know it's an imposition, but Warren will take him to accommodate an old friend. Broken to the house, Jason will make Warren a good servant. No mortgage on him. The Jew wouldn't lend on him at the time. I can dispose of him as I please."

"Reckon it won't git you in no trouble with the Jew fer me to take along Ellen and the big buck without payin'?"

"No trouble at all. You can send me the money—enough to discharge the mortgages on them, that is. For the rest there's no hurry, no hurry at all. I'll live a few months yet, and if I don't—." Wilson raised his hands from the arms of his chair in completion of his sentence.

The entry of Charles diverted the host from his morbid speculation.

"You goin' to have to take a nigger on the crupper," Hammond explained to him.

"An' he cain't run, better you and me straddle your horse and let him have mine. That buck big as you and me together."

"Not him. Not the Mandingo. He kin keep up alongside. I—I bought me a wench and Mista Wilson here done give me a nice saplin' buck fer Papa."

"Cain't that saplin' run?" Charles asked. "You'll want the wench, I reckon, behind you. Whyn't the little buck ride the big one?"

"Better take along my old buckboard," Wilson suggested. "You can return it at your convenience."

"We make out all right, Mista Wilson, suh; Mede on foot, the young buck behin' Charles, Ellen behin' me. We go fine. Ellen ride astraddle, cain't she?"

"If you tell her to. It's the best way to ride double for a long distance. Of course, you know the danger; it might rip her maidenhead."

"Never mind that. I know she got it. Horse bust it, save me the trouble," declared Hammond.

"You couldn't take it? She fight you off?" asked Charles in amazement.

"Never mind," Hammond said. "Never mind."

"Glad I chosen that Edna. She never try to fight me at all. She cry and holler and all, but she never fight none. Dick al'ays break 'em at home, before I got to 'em. Now I knows whut it like."

"A gentleman's education," the old man observed. "No worse for the

delay."

The stillness of the overcast day was ominous. The water-saturated air constricted the body. There was no energy to breathe. Even the horses were languid as they switched their tails and awaited their riders. The old Negro groom who walked them forward and back before the honse scanned the sky, shaking his head in wonder what urgent errand would prompt a white man to activity in such weather.

Mede had the temerity to seat himself upon the portico, knowing that amid the adieux he would not be reprimanded. He held his shoes on his lap lest he should leave them behind, and pensively played with his bare toes.

Jason rounded the house and joined Mede, but did not sit down. Ellen, when she came, was red-eyed from weeping, and she twice returned to the quarters but both times she emerged again without carrying anything in her hand. She stood apart from the others.

Some twenty hands, old and of middle age, accumulated at the side of the mansion, but none ventured beyond its façade. Edna and Letitia ran furtively forward to give final kisses to Ellen, who clung to them, and to Jason, who assumed indifference. Mede watched them and knew that if those kisses had been for him he would have wept.

The occasion was a solemn one for the three, none of whom had ever passed the boundaries of The Coign. To go had been their own determinations. Their old master would not have disposed of them without their several hasty assents. To be sure, he had reasons for selling them, reasons which were theirs not to question, but they all knew that at their plea to stay he would cancel his bargains and keep them until he died. They were going at their, at least nominal, volition, but their departure was as solemn as if it had been forced upon them. The sultry atmosphere was no leaven for their spirits.

The front door opened and Charles came out, followed shortly by Wilson, guided by Ben. Hammond came last. The host shook the hands of the two guests, and, amid expressions of mutual pleasure, Charles and Hammond mounted their horses. Charles was restive and annoyed at Wilson's prolonged farewells to the slaves. Hammond sat his horse patiently and waited.

Mede stood diffidently apart while the master kissed and blessed the boy and girl, adjured them to obedience. He went bashfully with hanging head when he was summoned, and when his master reached for his gross head a tear stood in his eye. Mede could not remember being kissed before and it suddenly came over him that he would never again see the man to whose kindness he owed what Mede deemed much—ample food, shelter, protection, the absence of positive abuse, what between master and slave is justice, mercy even.

The stallion, unused to being ridden double, shied and reared in protest when Ellen, with a boost from the groom, sought to mount behind Hammond. With the second try, she seated herself sidewise behind the saddle but her

long skirt impeded her from getting her leg across the horse.

"Cain't ride that a-way," Hammond complained. "You'll slide off an' pull me with you. Have to straddle."

Ellen tucked her dress upward until it reached only to her knees, slid backward over the horse's croup and maneuvered her leg across in front of her. She then scrooged herself forward into as comfortable a seat as she could attain. She was uneasy about the display of her legs and tried to pull down her skirt.

"Nev' mind showin' your limbs. We ain't goin' to meet no ladies on the road nohow, day like this. Hold on to me tight till Eclipse here gits usen to you. Don' be afeared; I ain't pizen. Not that way! You choke me. Put your arms around my belly. That's right."

Jason, with the aid of the groom, swung himself handily behind Charles and encircled his body, the boy's legs dangling loosely over the gelding's loins.

"Ready, Mede? Then come along," said Hammond, putting his horse into motion and setting the pace at a slow walk as the riders rounded the lawn and turned into the avenue of walnuts. Mede followed the horses at a slow jog. He carried both shoes swinging from his left hand. Before they reached the gate he had overtaken the horses and was jogging ahead. He slowed to learn which direction to turn.

CHAPTER 15

HAMMOND headed west. The long-untraveled road was good, eroded by small gullies, and in places overgrown with scraggly weeds, but always distinct and passable. The horses broke into a slow canter, and Mede lengthened his stride, running easily at the side of the road. Hammond inquired whether he was all right, whether he could keep up with the horses, and the Mandingo said that he could.

The sun was only a slightly more luminous patch than the rest of the leaden sky and never broke through the low clouds which weighed upon the lower atmosphere. No breeze stirred. Hammond's stallion stopped short to empty his bladder and Ellen's feet were splattered with the hot urine.

They crossed a rill and Mede lay flat to gulp a drink and loped to catch the horses. The others were thirsty but not enough to dismount. Houses were few and for the most part small cabins, chinked logs with an occasional one of clapboards. They passed one two-story house with a long balcony in front. Four or five cabins stood behind it, but nobody was visible, the grounds were overgrown with weeds, and the place seemed to be unoccupied.

A moustached man on a small gray mare said, "Howdy," as he passed. He looked at Mede and said appraisingly, "Likely buck."

Hammond nodded. "Right likely," he acknowledged.

"You buyer?" the man asked, and Ham denied it without show of resentment.

"Thought mayhap you wuz. Don't know nobody wants to buy a good fat wench with a sucker in her?"

Hammond said he didn't, and rode ahead.

"Don't hold around so tight," Charles admonished Jason, slapping his hands with the loop of the bridle. "Cain't git the air. Set back and hold on the saddle—cain't ye? You won't fall off."

"Yes, suh, Masta. But I'll fall."

Charles kicked his horse into a trot in a deliberate effort to spill the boy behind him, but Jason clung precariously to the saddle with one hand and grasped Charles' shoulder with the other. An empty stomach made Charles petulant and it was well past noon.

It was nearing two o'clock when they came upon the nucleus of a village —a grocery store, which also sold dry goods and served whiskey, a blacksmith shop, a large barn in the yard next to which two mules and a spavined horse lazed in the sun, and four scattered houses, the largest of which was flush with the road and had two cabins behind it.

"Mayhap we kin git some vittles. Seem like a town," said Hammond. "Slide around and git down, Ellen."

The girl lumbered stiffly to the ground, pulled her osnaburg dress away from her posterior to which her sweat had glued it, and modestly lowered

her wrinkled skirt. Hammond rose in the stirrups, threw his sound leg over the horse's rump and agilely disengaged his stiffened one. Jason slid precariously backward off the gelding's back at the risk of being kicked, and Charles dismounted with a relieved sigh. The white men tied their mounts to the long and insecure rack beside the store.

The grocer leaned back in his chair beside the stove in which no fire burned. He raised his steel-framed glasses and propped them above his brow with one hand and laid aside his newspaper with the other, but did not rise to greet his customers. "Who you reckon goin' to be Vice-President with old Andy this time? Reckon Johnson? A good man in spite of livin' with that nigger slut. What's a slut more or less? I'm fer him, and the Gen'l's a-wantin' him."

"I reckon," agreed Hammond uncomprehendingly. "Kin I git some bait fer our horses and some dinner anywhures?"

The man got np and wandered to the window before he answered. "Ol' Crock, over in the barn, will bait your animals. Two on 'em, eh? Pay here; twenty cents apiece; forty cents, about right. Tell that Crocodile, I say to give 'em plenty of oats an' draw 'em fresh water. They tired and thirsty. Come a long ways?"

"From Coign Plantation," Hammond answered. "Kin we git dinner?"

"How is Mista Wilson? Is he still alive? I was wonderin' jest t'other day. Right old, ain't he? Folks says he near flat; used to have right smart of money. Too bad. Never was no bnsiness man—a reader, that's whnt he was, a reader. No money sense. I knows him; that is not intimate. I seed him once. Mista Wilson fer re-electin' Old Hickory, I reckon? Reckon he would be. Ever'body seems like is."

A nod sufficed for an answer. "Reckon there's anywhures to git dinner?"

"How many?"

"Five. The two of us and three niggers."

"Don't know. Miz Lane, right acrost the road—this settlin' is called Lane after her lamented; he started it, settled here and built. Miz Lane might have Lame Flora rassel you a few vittles. Don't know. Wouldn't do no harm to try her. But I tell you, she's steep. Charges jest as much fer niggers. Cain't jew her down none. Dealer? Right young fer that callin', lesten your pappy was a dealer afore you."

Hammond took time to disavow the profession.

"I was goin' to say, if you wuz, they ain't no good a messin' around this neck. Dealers comes through and comes through, cain't scare up no niggers to buy. Nobody ain't got none, not none worth drivin', a few knotty runts here and yon, lame or ruptured or old or has fits or somethin'. Everybody sold their stout young niggers off to the dealers. I did, my own self. Thought the market was through goin' up. It keeps climbin', it seem like—but no niggers. Wonder whut becomes of all on 'em. Dies off, I reckon, soon as they git to them swamps around N' Orleans."

"I'll carry the hosses to the barn an' then try acrost the road," declared Hammond in his effort to escape from the grocer.

"Cain't cutter with Miz Lane or if you find her too steep, I kin let you have some crackers and cheese. Keep you'uns alive. I about live on 'em, them and rock candy. I love rock candy. Let me cut you a sliver of this cheese to taste. Right nice."

"Mayhap, we'll come back."

The grocer followed to the door. "As I was sayin', this ain't no nigger breedin' country round here nohow. Git a breedin' slut knocked up and all, and, if she don't slip it afore she has it, the sucker dies right off on you, or if it lives, it's puny an' triflin'. Right discouragin' with niggers so high."

"Is that!" assented Ham. "Mede, gather them horses." Mede rose from the porch on which he had flopped to rest.

The grocer strode to the edge of the porch, cupped his hands over his mouth and called, "Crock, Crock," and waited. "Crocodile, you heathen bastard."

"Yas, suh, Masta," from the barn.

"You answer when I holler. Want another hidin'? Bait this gen'man's hosses. Oats. Oats, mind, not corn. And fresh water 'em, fresh, un'erstan'? And rub 'em down good while the gen'man eats his dinner. They's paid. Tend 'em good or you'll sleep on your belly."

"I tend 'em, Masta, suh. I tend 'em."

The grocer had given his Negro his instructions directly and Hammond thought it useless to follow Mede, who was leading the horses toward the barn. Instead, he crossed the road and knocked on Mrs. Lane's door. A small, blue-lipped, white woman of sixty or nearing that age answered in due time. Her hair was so tightly drawn into a knot on the top of her scalp that her brows lifted from the tension. A black-rimmed toe protruded from a hole in her black stocking, but the unbelted frock of indigo dyed calico which enveloped her was fresh and so stiffly starched as in places to obscure its color. At her neck was pinned a long, narrow brooch on which there were only traces to show that it had once been gilded.

"Why, yes, I reckon Flora kin stir you up some ham and eggs or sich. Two gen'lemen, three niggers, eh? Niggers jest the same as gen'lemen—it's two bits, twenty-five cents, whoever eats it. The niggers cain't come in the house, I won't have 'em. Have to take it in a pan and eat it over on the grocery gallery. Mr. Wallace will let 'em."

Hammond acquiesced in the woman's terms.

"Come in and set while Flora stirs it." The large bare room was cooler than the weather outside, and Hammond accepted the invitation and beckoned his cousin. Mrs. Lane seated them and retired.

"I'm hongry," Charles argued petulantly.

"Won't be long. Prob'ly won't be good. Got to wait." Hammond consoled.

The odors of cookery permeated the house and in a surprisingly short

time, which seemed surprisingly long to Charles, Mrs. Lane returned and announced, "Vittles most ready, sich as 'tis. Flora right slow and triflin', havin' her stroke and all. You all wants a drink of corn, best to go acrost to the grocery, fer I don't dispense it and won't stand it in the house. Lane, he died of corn, and I cain't abide the pizen. You gits back, the meal will be a-steamin'."

The need of a drink had not occurred to Hammond until now, but, when the woman suggested it, the idea appealed to him. He was deterred, however, by the difficulty of escape from the loquacity of the grocer. He opened the door to look at his Negroes and saw Mede sprawled asleep on his back on the grocer's porch, arms above his head. Ellen and Jason sat patiently, head in hands, on the porch's edge. The sky darkened threateningly.

"You hongry. Dinner comin'. Jest wait," he called.

"Yes, suh," replied Ellen without enthusiasm, but she smiled her admiration of him.

Mrs. Lane returned. "You kin call your servants, suh," she said. "Let 'em come to the back door; they pans ready fer 'em—same like white, only no dishes. Then you kin come in."

The red cotton cloth on the wobbly table with its broken caster was spotted with food, and the dining room was bleak with tall, gray walls, unrelieved except for large stains which seemed to be the results of eggs thrown at the plaster with considerable force. Crude kitchen chairs with hard seats and spindle backs were ranged together along one side of the room, besides the two at the table. The floor was clean but bare, except for a small wrinkled rag rug with a worn hole in it that sprawled in front of a low, cushioned rocking chair beside the lone window.

The food was all on the table—a pungent array of it, fried ham and thick bacon, fried eggs, hot yellow biscuits, exuding the usual excess of soda, a whole round pound of golden butter, pickles, jelly, a pitcher of milk, and a big tin pot of coffee.

Mrs. Lane sat in the rocker and directed Flora, who had cooked and was doing her best to serve the meal. There was little for her to do, since all the food was in easy reach of the two diners. Flora dragged her right foot and her right arm was useless. She was tall, angular, raw boned, with a long, narrow middle incisor, beside a gap in her gums where the mate to it was missing, which caused her to lisp the few words she spoke. Younger than her mistress by a decade, she was not quite black, perhaps a mulatto, or more likely the result of a cross of a mulatto and a pure black.

The dinner tasted as good as it smelled. The boys were too hungry to be critical, but the food would have withstood criticism. Mrs. Lane, from her seat by the window, depreciated the food as a depreciation of Flora, but knew that it was good.

"That triflin' wench jest petered out—that's all, jest petered. Used to cook right good, with me behind a-tellin' her, but not no more. Burns every-

thin' or on'y cooks 'em half. Look at them aigs, now! Flora, fill up them cups and pass around the ham, cain't you, and dish the gen'lemen some of that persarve."

"Yas, um, Mist'ess," Flora mumbled, rolling her eyes toward Mrs. Lane.

"Don't want her, do you? Don't want to buy her? Ben a-tryin' to git me shet of her a long time. Sell her real cheap."

Hammond disclaimed his interest, but Mrs. Lane persisted.

"I offers her to dealers comin' through, but they won't even finger her, won't look her over. They say niggers is high, but don't look like. Course Flora ain't a fancy, don't offer her as a fancy, but ought to bring somethin'. That limpin' don't count. It mostly put on to keep from bein' sold. Whut Flora need is a good snakin' to make her walk straight. Ain't had a snakin' since before Lane died. You wouldn't expect me to give her none, and Mista Wallace acrost the road won't do it. I ast him. That's whut you need, Flora, a good snakin'. Ain't it?"

"Yas, 'um," Flora admitted with reluctance. "But las' time ol' Masta whup me jest before I cripped. I reckon that snakin' about ruint me."

"Rubbish," said Mrs. Lane. "Flora brought five or six, maybe seven, seven, right good chilern. Sold 'em right well, nothing like now, with niggers up so, but right well. Sold the last one to a dealer only jest two or three year back, a buck, right likely, too; been a wench, I'd a kept it. Didn't have to sell, got plenty. But it was a buck, gittin' big an' no wenches around, I got askeared with all the talk goin' around about them kind of things, and me alone. Thought some of havin' him altered, but got afeared I'd lose him. Jest like throwin' seven hundred dollars right outn this here winder. Thought better to sell him off and buy me a young breedin' wench, but the buyers ast so much. Ain't never found one yet that I kin afford. That wench of yourn ain't fer sale I reckon. I'll throw in Flora and pay boot. Don't need no buck. Kin use that Crocodile of Mista Wallace's acrost the road free fer naught time I got a wench. Mista Wallace right neighborly. He, ol' Crock I mean, is kind of stove up, but he the pappy of Flora's last two, and ol' Miz Smith—you passed her place comin' by—she got a wench quick by Crock right now, so he still got sap. Mista Wallace never charge her nothin', but of course she buys from him."

Hammond finished his meal and waited for Charles. He had escaped Wallace only to have to listen to Mrs. Lane.

She continued her monologue. "So you ain't inerested in buyin' Flora? Only half a nigger, but I'll keep a-tryin'. I'll git me shet of her one these days, somebody goin' want her."

Charles finished at last and Hammond rose.

"You satisfied?" inquired Mrs. Lane. When Hammond said that he was satisfied and that the dinner was good, she said, "It's a dollar and a half fer all. Have to charge twicet fer that big buck. He et enough fer two. It's a dollar and a half. Of course, if you won't pay fer him double—"

Hammond paid without protest. He opened the door to see how his Negroes had fared and saw that the sky was jaundiced. Wind had risen and copper hued clouds swept before it across the vault. It was a relief from the stifling stillness, but a downpour was certain. Hammond crossed the road and saw the empty pans of sheet iron and the empty drinking gourds beside them on the floor of the porch.

"Dinner all right?" he asked.

"Yes, suh, Masta," was in chorus, to which Ellen added a "Thank you, Masta." She prodded Jason with her elbow at which he raised and lowered his eyes bashfully and said, "Thank you, Masta, suh."

"That better," Hammond acknowledged. "Always mind your manners. Mede?"

"Yes, suh; thank you, suh."

"Enough?" Hammond asked. "Then take the pans back to the lady over there, Jason. An' don't fergit yo' manners."

Charles scanned the firmament as he crossed the road. "Go to rain, I reckon; pour."

"Hadn't better start out an' git ketched," said Hammond. "Better stay here the night. No good startin' out after the rain, if it stops. Cain't git nowhures."

"If Miz Lane will have us," speculated Charles.

"Barn's dry fer the hosses," said Ham.

"An' fer the niggers. Old woman won't have 'em," added Charles.

"I'd better go back acrost and see has she got room."

Hammond knocked again on the Lane door and it was opened so quickly that he was sure the woman had been eavesdropping on what was going on on the Wallace porch across the road.

"Got one bed, wide fer two. Clean. No bugs. Four bits. But no niggers, that is one buck if you likes to wait on you, but no more—no wenches. Don't care whut you does over in the straw in the barn, but not here. No wenches. You kin dicker with Mista Wallace fer 'em a bed in the barn. He got good strong spancels to tether 'em with. Better have him spancel ol' Crock too, an' you don't want him at that wench afore mornin'."

"We'll want supper, too. Won't need much, with dinner so late, but we'll need supper all around."

"Won't be no cheaper," the widow said. "Two bits a meal, breakfast, dinner, or supper, niggers an' all."

Hammond acquiesced.

"Niggers done et; they don't really need no more till mornin'. Have to feed 'em come mornin', that one a-runnin' anyways. Shame not to. Cain't run good on empty stomick."

"Niggers eats when I eats," declared Hammond. "I wants suppers fer 'em an' breakfast."

"None of my put in. You a-payin'. Flora will stir it, but it will be extrie

agin fer that big buck. Cain't fill him up fer less."

As Hammond returned to the store, a big bodied man on spindle legs emerged from it, followed by a fat adolescent boy with a round face and thick, blubbery lips, stiff, straw-like hair, and bold violet eyes. The man's face was concealed behind a wild untrimmed coarse beard of mingled red and black. He had violet eyes like the boy's. The grocer emerged last, and looked at the sky.

"Prob'ly a twister somers," said the grocer.

"Hope not here," said the bearded man. "Me an' Aristotle better wait. Better not strike out now."

"Better wait," said the grocer.

"We goin' to stop the night at Miz Lane," Hammond said. "Reckon you got room fer the niggers in the barn."

"It'll cost you, of course. Three on 'em?"

"Two. Miz Lane lets one buck sleep on the floor. She say that your nigger got to be spanceled agin the wench."

"Old Crock, he harmless; but I'll spancel him ifn you says. Cost you two bits fer the two, besides another bait fer your hosses. Traveling right costive, 'specially with niggers."

"Right," Ham agreed.

The rain began to fall in monstrous drops, spattering the road. The wind increased and the water was soon coming down in undulant sheets.

Hammond commanded his Negroes to stand further back toward the building to avoid the water that blew upon the porch. The stillness had given place to fury. Lightning zigzagged across the sky, followed by thunder which crashed deafeningly. Jason wept in his fear of the elements and Mede placed his arm around the boy's shoulder.

"Dry up," Hammond admonished Jason. "Ain't nothin' goin' to hurt you. Cain't help it an' if it do. Don't act like a wench. Look at Ellen."

"Like that storm two year ago," said the grocer.

"I lost a sow and her litter in that one," said the man with the beard. "Guess they washed down the creek. Leastwise I never found hide nor hair."

The rain slackened, but renewed itself with greater force and heavier gusts. There was a blinding flash and a crash like doom. Jason trembled but did not weep.

During a second respite, the man with the beard remarked to nobody in particular, "Right likely niggers." Hammond nodded.

"Come from Coign, didn't they?" asked Wallace. "Ol' Mista Wilson breakin' up and sellin' off."

"I been layin' off to buy me a cheap, young buck for Aristotle, here. He has fits and dirties hisself, and I aims to buy me a buck to look after him an' clean him," said the bearded man.

"A slut," Aristotle corrected him. "I wants a slut."

"Buck or slut, don't make no difference. Buck's better, wouldn't fret your

Mamma. You cain't handle no slut yet awhile, nohow."

"I could, that age," said the grocer. "Cain't now."

"Bucks is cheaper," said the bearded man; " 'cept prime hands. That one there in the middle—buck or slut?"

"Buck, I reckon," said Hammond.

"You reckon? Don't you know?" asked the man.

"Jest got it. Mista Wilson say it a buck. Reckon he know."

"Bought it without shuckin' it? Funny."

"It a present. Real nice of Mista Wilson. I ain't had time to finger it. Got it jest this mornin'."

"Jason's a buck all right. I felt it," said Charles.

The bearded man, unsatisfied, walked across the porch and pulled Jason toward him, ran his hand between the boy's legs, felt of his thighs, belly, shoulders and arms. "Buck sure enough. You right, suh. Make a better slut at that. Right nice, if it had come a slut. Never make a prime hand, never in this world. Ain't got the bull in him fer it. Not like this other'n," and he transferred his attention to Mede. "His balls bustin' right through his britches. Don't got to feel has he got two of 'em."

Hammond was irritated by the man's temerity but held his tongue.

"This little one would do fer what I want him though. Whut you say, 'Stotle. Want Papa should buy him fer you?"

The boy blinked and nodded. "Sooner have a slut," he declared. "Whut's the difference between 'em?"

The grocer cackled with laughter at Aristotle's innocence.

"Ain't no difference fer you. This most like a slut. Want it?" asked the indulgent father.

"Kin I have a snake fer him, too?"

"That braided leather dog whup I got with the whistle in the handle to call him to you with is good enough till you gits bigger."

"That buck ain't fer sale. He a present, I tells you," Hammond cut short the bargain.

"Wouldn't pay much, anyways. Ain't worth it jest to cod the boy and wash his ass. Cain't afford a prime hand and don't need none."

Hammond walked to the east end of the porch, ostensibly to scan the weather.

"Miz Lane across the road got an ol' wench she craves to sell cheap. Good enough, I reckon, fer whut you wants," volunteered Charles.

"Lame Flora?" asked the storekeeper. "Miz Lane bin a-sellin' Lame Flora fer thirty year, offer her cheap to every buyer that passes through. You couldn't buy Flora fer gold. Miz Lane would die right off without Flora to holler at. Which ever of 'em dies off first, the othern will go along right after. Miz Lane sellin' off Flora is a joke around the settlement. She wouldn't no more than she couldn't."

"Wisht you'd watch out fer a cheap young buck, Mista Wallace, suh.

Buyers always comin' through with 'em."

"Not cheap no more," replied the grocer. "Whyn't you buy 'Stotle a nice young breedin' slut instead? Take a sucker outn her ever' year a'most? Ol' Crock right here, eatin' his head off an' never bein' used. Won't cost you a cent. You're a good customer an' right welcome to him. Make money."

"Wouldn't need Crock. I'm better than Crock, my own se'f. Besides, I'm a white man. But I'm afeared it make 'Stotle's fits come oftener, seein' it and not able to do it. 'Stotle ain't hung but jest a peanut. Besides, my woman would raise hell with a female around me, or with a buck around the gals. Course, could ring a buck."

"Rain's a-quittin'," Hammond called. "Could make a few miles yet, but reckon we better not stir. Might not find a place as good."

The lowering sun appeared between two banks of cumulus, and a vivid rainbow shimmered in tbe east. The bearded man took the fat boy by the hand and struck off down the road.

"Mud right thick, but he don't live more'n a quarter," said Wallace. He watched the two jump puddles. "He couldn't scare fifty dollars fer that nigger Queen of Shebie. Be he right about one thing, though; that boy does stink after he have one of his fits."

"Have your boy feed my hosses again, please, suh, Mista Wallace, before he bed 'em down nice, come time," Hammond requested.

"That stud o' yourn try to bite Crock. He's afeared of him," said the grocer.

"Eclipse jest a-sportin'. Don't mean nothin', though he do hate a musky nigger."

"He hate Crock then. But he'll care of him. He'll care of him, yassuree. I warned the old son-of-a-bitch that he hit that stallion or kick him or neglect him, I'd turkentine him, an' I got down the bottle and made him smell of it. By god, I would, too. I'd relish it, an' Crock know it."

"An' I'll turpentine you, Mede, if you touches this Ellen wench tonight, or even if you lets anybody else touch her, white gen'leman or nigger buck. Ever been turpentined?"

"No, suh, Masta, but I have heard of it, and I don't want it."

"Do him good, do him good. I got plenty, you need it," said the grocer.

"Mede ain't afeared of me, an' he does right; are you, Mede?"

"No, suh, Masta."

"You and Ellen will sleep in the barn. Mista Wallace will give you fresh straw, mayhap a blanket. Jason will go in the house with Mista Charles and me."

"Want we should bed down right now, Masta?" asked Ellen.

"Right after supper."

"I want to put their spancels on 'em, before it darkens. Better bait 'em now."

"My niggers won't need no spancels, but that Crock of yourn better be

chained up Miz Lane say."

"They your niggers. I do whut you all say, but they not fur from their raisin' place. You jest got 'em and they apt to run."

"I'll risk it," said Hammond.

"An' they don't run, spancels around their ankles ain't goin' to do no harm. Spancel 'em well apart. It won't only keep the buck from gittin' to the slut but keep the slut offn the two bucks. Unlessen you mayhap want black suckers outn her."

"Jest Crock," persisted Hammond.

"I'll chain him up short. An' you wants spancels fer the otherns, I'll lay 'em out and you kin click 'em on when you bed 'em. The same key fits 'em all and I'll keep hit."

Supper proved to be a repetition of dinner, including Mrs. Lane's solicitation of a buyer for Flora, a sing-song patter that she repeated by rote. Hammond had never seen an elephant, but he had seen pictures of them, and one of the stains on the wall assumed for him in the flickering candlelight an elephantine outline. He wondered whether the stain was somebody's crude attempt to draw. It interested him more than the hostess' second hawking of her infirm slave. The meal, so soon following and so like the former one, did not interest him at all. He and Charles had nothing that demanded to be said to each other, but Mrs. Lane's monologue precluded conversation between the boys, anyway.

After dinner, Charles followed Hammond across the road to the grocer's porch to see how the slaves had fared. Ellen had not been hungry and Jason had eaten hardly at all. Mede, however, had consumed his two meals, had emptied Ellen's pan, and was in the process of finishing the meal that Jason had left.

"You sick, Jason?" asked Hammond solicitously. "Why you not eat?"

"No, suh, Masta; I am full from dinner. I just a-thinking."

"Wish you was back at The Coign, do you. Homesick?"

"No, suh, Masta. I like it here. I like riding. I like you, Masta, and I like Masta Charles. He is so tall and so pretty and his hair so soft and smooth and straight. I don't want to go back to my old masta, if I can be with you—and him."

Charles was unused to praise, and admiration, even from a slave boy, touched the quick of his ego. He lifted himself to his full height and self-consciously ran his hand through his mane. Charles was indeed tall and he had a profusion of hair. There was little more to say for him, but Jason had hit upon his essential vanities.

He was not so pleased when Jason asked, "Masta, please, suh, is Masta Charles your boy? Are you his papa?" Charles was ashamed of his youth and resented comparison with Hammond's maturity. He was proud, however, of the relationship, which Hammond explained briefly.

"An' you doesn't eat more, Jason, I'll have to oil you out, I gits you home.

Comin' on spring, mayhap, you needs some sassafras tea," Hammond commented.

"You ain't even seen that buck," Charles said. "Let's shuck him down an' finger him over right now. Won't be no ladies out this late and Miz Lane back in the house a-drivin' that crip."

"Ain't no hurry. Wait till we gits to Falconhurst, cain't you? Ol' Mista Wilson ain't sendin' no unsound nigger to my papa. Bein' it's a buck, the shape of its ass don't make no difference. You don' reckon to find tits, does you?"

"Don't know. Might—on that one."

"You still eatin', Mede? Reckon I bought me a varmint. No wonder Mista Wilson flat busted—feedin' you fer seventeen years."

"I am just eating what Jason left, Masta, suh. I won't eat much when we get to your plantation. I won't, Masta, suh, not more than any other nigger. I'm an easy keeper."

Ham took a step toward where the Mandingo sat on the porch and patted his shoulder. "I likes to watch you stuff away vittles, boy. Don't you fret about eatin' at Falconhurst. More you eats, the harder you fights. Not eatin' is whut bother me—Jason there."

Ellen had moved to another part of the porch and sat alone. Hammond joined her and sat down. He drew her toward him and felt her breast quicken as he inserted his hand beneath her osnaburg. She drew away from him and he reprimanded her but with kindly words, "Don't you scrouge away from me. You my wench now. Your tits mine to play with when I wants 'em, ain't they?"

"Yes, suh, Masta."

He removed his hand, tipped her head and kissed her mouth. A tremor as of pain passed through the girl. She turned and knelt on the floor beside him, encircled his neck tightly with her arms and kissed him long. Then she began to cry.

"Whut ailin' you?" Ham asked. "You doesn't like me?"

"Masta, suh, Masta, suh, Masta, I love you, Masta. Don't you see I love you?"

Charles wandered toward them. "Her titties hard?" he asked.

"They nice. Not very big, but they nice," Hammond replied factually.

"Blanche got nice titties. Only one thing about Blanche, plenty of tit."

Hammond had quite forgotten Blanche.

The moon, nearing the full, spread over the landscape. Hammond said, "We could of rode on. Better bed 'em down and go to bed. We kin start early."

He gestured to the slaves and picked his way through the mud toward the barn. "Charles, you and Jason go back," he said. "No need you to clodhop along. Wait."

The nail keg hoop, presumed to hold closed the wide gate of the barn

lot, caught on the fence and Hammond commanded Mede to break it. It was not needed, since the gate had to be lifted off the ground to permit it to swing on its squeaky hinges. The rain had soaked through a litter of hay, straw, shucks, and cobs, which served as a cushion over the mud, but which gave forth a sweetish odor of manure and urine mixed with decaying vegetation. Ham swung open one of the wide doors of the barn and propped it open; Mede, the other which required no prop. A trapezium of moonlight lay on the earthen floor of the wry edifice and light falling through the vertical cracks in the left wall fell on the back part of the floor and striped the right wall to its middle.

It seemed dark in the barn until Ham's pupils dilated. Eclipse, scenting his master, whinnied and Hammond spoke to him.

"Hello, there. Crock!" the white man called.

From the back of the barn Crock answered, "Here I is, Masta. Here I is, suh, but I cain't come, I cain't. 'Scuse me, Masta, suh, I cain't. I chained up."

Hammond felt his way back to the stall where the Negro lay.

"Please, Masta, suh, unloosen me. I won't mess roun' that wench. I won't, suh, please. I doesn't likes 'em so white. Please, suh, Masta!" Crock begged.

"I ain't got no key fer the spancel. Mista Wallace, he got the key. He chain you, he unchain you come mornin'." Hammond felt for the chain, jerked on it and found it secure. It was about two feet long, one end securely affixed to the wall some four feet from the ground, the other to the manacle around Crock's ankle, forcing him to lie on his back with his foot in the air. For a presumed additional security, Wallace had roped the wrists of the black together behind his back. To Hammond this precaution appeared unneeded, since he could trust Ellen to stay out of Crock's reach; and he told the slave to sit upright, or rather in a V-shaped position, while he picked the complicated knot of the rope which bound Crock's hands. Hammond sensed some temerity about releasing a Negro whose master had restrained him, but Wallace had shackled the old boy's foot at the behest of Ham, who was willing to risk the freedom of his hands.

Crock's gratitude was profound and the expression of it crudely eloquent. "Thank'ee, Masta, suh; thank'ee, suh," over and over while Ham worked at the knot. "My Masta ha'd on me. He work me and work me, and then he chain me up. I cain't sleep, an' I cain't git that yaller slut and cain't even git my han's in front of me. Thank'ee, Masta. You wouldn't serve your nigger so. You'd leave him his han's, even when you wouldn' give him no slut. You good masta, Masta, suh. Thank'ee, suh. Masta, buy me. Take me with you, Masta. I work, I work hard fer you, Masta. You kin snake me, an' I don't work. I strong. I not old, not ve'y old, I solid and vig'ous, Masta. You kin buy me cheap. Leave me shuck down, come mornin', and look at me. Feed me up some and I good boy yet. Whure my guts sticks through my belly don't hurts hardly none. I puts 'em back whure they belongs. An' my crooked leg whure

I broke it don't hol' me back none, Masta, suh, please. You got cripped leg too, Masta."

"I'll see, come mornin'," Hammond promised, with no intention but with some compassion.

"Why ain't your hoss like me, Masta?" Crock asked, after he had finished his prolonged thanks. "He sure proud hoss. Doesn' like me. I like him. I likes hosses."

"Cain't stan' yo' stink I reckon. Eclipse don' like nigger stink. He always has yaller boys who been washed. Don' wonder hoss don't like you."

"I wash, I wash in mornin', pleases your hoss, soon as Ol' Masta fetch that key."

"No good washin' you now. I rides on, come mornin'."

"I won't hurt your hoss, Masta, even he bite me like he try. No, suh, Masta. My masta say he turkentine me an' I hurt him, and he means it. Took down the turkentine offn the shelf. I don' crave no turkentinin', naw suh."

"You do anythin' to that hoss—or that wench—I'll terpentine you my own self. Your masta can hold you open an' I'll pour it in."

"You wouldn't, you woul'n't. I knows you woul'n't, Masta. But don' fret, Masta. I won' hurt your hoss, won' even slap his face, an' he bite my han' all off."

The knot untied and Crock's hands free, Hammond once more tried the chain that shackled the Negro to the wall and left him so. Crock continued to thank Hammond long after he had gone, interspersing pleas for relief from the chain between expressions of gratitude for the removal of the rope. The white man ignored him; and, after a few violent yanks at the chain, Crock fell back, foot in air, subsiding into silence.

Wallace was good as his word. In the front of the barn, Hammond found two mounds of fresh straw, with space between them of some twenty feet. Beside each pallet hung open spancels, attached one to the wall and the other to a stanchion, for use at Hammond's discretion. The chains on them reached fully to the floor and would have afforded their victims less discomfort than the one on Crock, if Hammond had chosen to use them.

Ham kicked the straw about to spread it and commanded Ellen to lie down. He knelt beside the girl, briefly caressed her breast, and kissed her. "Not like las' night," he said, "but straw thick an' long. Not no feather bed like we'll have at Falconhurst. Mede will take care of you. Don't be afeared."

"I'm all right, Masta. Good night, Masta, suh," said Ellen, sprawled in the moonlight.

"Take care of Ellen, Mede, and watch out that nigger don't git loose."

"Yes, suh, Masta, an' you tell me; but I'll hurt Ellen sure. She's little and I'm big," warned the Mandingo. "I knows how all right, but I'd rather wait till you around to tell me."

"You black varmint, you pesters that wench tonight, I'll snake you, I'll snake you plumb to death, an' you even fingers her. I don't mean 'take care'

that a-way. I means don't let nobody in here to her, white or black, nobody. Un'erstan'?"

"I understand, Masta."

Hammond released one door and was swinging it shut when Ellen called to him, "I like the moonlight, Masta. Please leave the doors open."

"Might as well," said Hammond. "Ain't no difference." He replaced the prop, and Ellen watched him limp across the littered lot, fumble with the gate and disappear down the muddy road.

As Hammond approached the grocery store, he saw Charles sitting on the porch. He seemed to be hugging to his body that of the naked Jason, but as Hammond drew nearer, Charles suddenly flung an object across the road and the boy ran to retrieve it.

"Couldn't wait to git him home to peel him down an' look at him," said Hammond. "All right, ain't he? No ruptures or scars? He sound?"

"He sound, yes," answered Charles with some embarrassment; "that is, fur as I kin see in the moonshine. But he won't never make no fighter. Good bettin' nigger, but no fighter."

"Didn't git him to fight him. Jest cain't think about nothin' but fighters, kin you, Cousin Charles?"

"Good bettin' nigger. Lots of gen'lemen will lay a good strong field han' against a nice, smooth, purty, little griffe buck like that."

"I won't bet him neither. Papa will have to keep him. A present."

"Ol' Wilson go to die. He never know. Want me to break him fer house buck. Let me have him fer body servant. I break him."

"'Pend upon whut Papa say. He's hisn," Hammond dismissed the subject. "Put on your britches, boy. Hadn't ought to take 'em off. Miz Lane might—"

"Masta Charles there told me," Jason justified his nudity.

"Nev' mind. Pull on your britches. We go acrost to bed."

There was no visible light in the house, but the dining room door opened and through the window Hammond saw Mrs. Lane cross the front room with candle aloft in response to his knock. "Gittin' late," she complained as she opened the door. "Thought you might of rode on. Beginnin' to reckon you didn't want no bed. Near eight o'clock."

"Is it ready?" Hammond asked.

"Yes, come in. That nigger stink?" she asked. "Don't want no musky niggers in the house. Flora enough."

"This 'un don' stink, ma'am," said Hammond. "That is, not much."

"Come here to me," the woman bade the reluctant boy. She stooped and sniffed him audibly and ran her hand over him. "Don't stink too bad," was her verdict; "and he sure enough buck. Las' month a gen'leman snuck a yeller slut into my room britched up like a buck. 'Tain't decent, befoolin' a pore, helpless widder woman like that. I knows you ain't that breed, but yet an' all."

Mrs. Lane raised her candle high and led the way, throwing open a door in the right wall. "You won't need no can'le, jest to git to bed. The moon's out," she said and left without closing the door.

A bedstead of battered wood stood in the center of the bare, rough floor. Except for a worn, red blanket on the floor, presumably intended as a pallet for the servant, the bed was the only piece of furniture. The room was long and barn-like, and the moonlight penetrated one of the two soiled windows to lie on the floor, quartered by shadows of the stiles.

When Hammond sat on the bed for Jason to remove his boots, he found only a thin straw mattress on a base of interwoven ropes. He pulled back the quilts to find the sheets wrinkled, as if slept on, but moderately clean.

"Don't know enough to wipe my feet when you skins my socks?" he censured the boy. "Always git the sweat from atween my toes." He fell backward for Jason to drag off his trousers and drawers.

Finishing undressing Hammond, Jason went around the bed to perform the same office for Charles, whose feet he duly wiped without prompting. Hammond crawled between the sheets and stretched out, and Charles joined him.

"What you want me to do now, Masta, suh?" inquired the slave.

"Why, lay down an' go to sleep. What you reckon? Put that ragged coverlid under you to keep you offn the floo'."

Hammond was tired but unable to sleep. He lay and tossed fretfully. Charles slept on his back, snoring, and Jason was jack-knifed on his side breathing audibly in a slow rhythm. Hammond nudged Charles with his elbow and told him to turn over, which he did without waking. Hammond continued wakeful.

Hammond got out of bed and walked to the window that gave upon the road. There was nothing to see except an expanse of moonlight over the grocery, blacksmith shop and barn. But Ellen slept in that barn.

He took up his trousers and drew them on without his drawers. He limped, barefooted, around the bed and with his foot rolled Jason over to rouse him. The startled boy sat upright unaware of where he was.

"What is it, Masta? What do you want?" he asked, rubbing his eyes.

"Git up and help me with my boots. Be quiet. We goin' to the barn."

The half oriented slave knelt before his master and fumbled with his socks. "Nev' mind socks; put on my boots."

"We going to start? Not without Masta Charles," protested Jason.

"Be quiet and nev' mind. Come along." The boy's bare feet were noiseless, but Hammond's boots seemed to him clamorous as he tried to slip quietly across the floor. He made his way into the front room and out the door, Jason at his heels. Cutting obliquely across the road toward the barn, he opened the gate of the paddock only enough to pass through it and picked his way toward the door. The moonlight had shifted and Ellen's bed was now in shadow. They entered the barn unheard. Crock's stertorous breathing

reverberated, but he could lie only supine and there was no remedy.

Hammond approached Ellen's pallet and had stooped to touch her when the Mandingo, suddenly aroused, emitted a wild wail of terror and was on Ham's shoulders, flailing him madly and knocking him to the ground. Jason in turn jumped on the back of Mede, but his blows and kicks passed unnoticed. "Masta! Masta!" Jason screamed; "It's Masta, Mede, it's Masta." The semi-somnolent Negro came awake and recognized the object of his assault.

"Masta!!" he exclaimed with amazement, gathering Hammond in his powerful arms and cuddling the man against his chest to comfort him as if he had been a small child. Mede's face contorted in an agony but tears wouldn't flow. He tried to speak but was dumb with contrition. He walked the floor with Ham in his arms, patting his back, as if the white man, his imprecations unheeded, were an infant whose colic he sought to soothe.

"You god-damn black son-of-a-bitch, leave me down. Leave me down, I say," screamed Hammond in his fury. "Leave me down. I'll kill you. I'll kill you."

Jason still clung to the Mandingo's back, one arm about his neck, raining blows upon the head of the big black with all his meager strength and emitting a petulant wail with no words. Ellen had risen to her feet and danced in her terror on the straw of her bed, unable to utter a sound.

At length Hammond's anger subsided and he called Mede's name in a low, firm voice. The Negro, suddenly aware that he was aggravating his offense, set his master on his feet and sank to his knees, groveling.

He dreaded the punishment he had incurred less than the condign wrath. He had committed the sin for which there was no penance; he had struck his white master. "Kill me! Kill me! Masta, suh," he begged, his head bowed, his hands washing each other.

The ludicrousness of the situation struck Hammond and the violence of his laughter intensified the fears of the Negroes. He sank upon an upturned bucket and rocked in his amusement as Mede crept toward him on his knees, still begging for death.

"Git up, you crazy bastard," commanded Hammond, clasping the boy on the shoulder. "You done right! You done jest right. I tol' you take care the wench. You shore 'nough taken care."

"I'm ashamed. I'm so ashamed, Masta, forgive me. I didn't know it was you. I thought you tryin' to rape Ellen."

"Course you did. You done jest right," Hammond insisted. "I'd hided you, an' yon hadn't."

Crock's snoring continued reverberating through the barn.

"Ellen, you an' Jason change your clothes. Take off your osnaburg and put on his britches. I goin' to take you back with me. I'm goin' to turn you into a buck," Hammond declared.

The girl failed to understand.

"Nev' min'; nev' mind," said the master. "You and him shuck yourself down." Ellen and Jason complied. "Now put on the buck's britches, and Jason, put on Ellen's dress."

Unabashed by her nakedness, Ellen was embarrassed at wearing pants. "Must I? Masta, must I?" she asked.

"Put 'em on," Hammond said. "An' ack like a buck. That Miz Lane see you, you a buck. Now don' fergit. Jason, put on that dress an' lay down on that straw."

Jason's pants were skin tight over Ellen's rump and thighs, and her breasts bulged his shirt. "Let me walk behind, Masta," she suggested. "It shames me to have you see me in boy's clothes."

"Don't be plagued, gal," answered her master. "You makes a likely buck. You only wear 'em till we gits pass Miz Lane into the room. Then you kin shuck down."

The pair encountered nobody and crept quietly through the front room into the bedroom. Charles sprawled in the middle of the bed and didn't wake. Ellen removed Hammond's boots and trousers, after which she took off her own clothes. Hammond nudged Charles onto the right side of the bed, crawled into the middle, and Ellen got in on his left.

"You's nice," he said kissing her and drawing her toward him with his arm around her body. "Now, I kin sleep. I got afeared; you out there with that big nigger. Couldn't hardly blame him none. I afeared."

"Mede wouldn't hurt me," she said. "I was safe with Mede; but you, Masta, I love you."

The master sensed the slave's exigence, wondered at his own lethargy. He was annoyed to acknowledge to himself that the mild odor of the slave's femaleness was pleasant. He was content to cuddle against her and to sleep.

The hour was still short of midnight; the moon-drenched silence was interrupted only by the howling of a dog somewhere in the distance and the answering howl of another nearer at hand.

When his master had gone, Mede lay down upon his straw but failed to sleep. His heart pounded as he considered the magnitude of his transgression, the absolution for which he deemed more merciful than just. Despite his master's praise, the slave's guilt still appalled him. That it was unwilled and had been forgiven did not, in Mede's contemplations, lessen its enormity.

Hammond was not sensible of any compassion for his Negroes. He made no conscious efforts to be just. They were slaves, chattles, mere things, and he so used them, but he had a way with them, maybe a sureness of himself, possibly a care for their welfare begotten of a regard for their value, that inspired their loyalty and even their love. Mede lay and thought of his own good fortune in achieving so kind, so good, so blond and beautiful a master. He shifted his position and made an effort to go to sleep. He knew that he would be compelled to keep up with the horses a livelong tomorrow, possibly far into tomorrow night, what with a full moon and his master's known

anxiety to reach his home. But still he could not sleep.

He got up and went to the door in which the moonlight had narrowed and looked down the road toward the house wherein his master slept with Ellen. He conceived of no less elegance than the bedrooms at The Coign. He was unaware that white flesh could repose in lesser beds. He pictured Ellen in the master's embrace and hoped that her servile body would allay the desires of the white man.

He looked down at Jason in woman's garb asleep on his belly, one arm raised above his head. He lay down beside him and, drawing the unwaking boy toward him, lay happily with him in his arms until he became suddenly aware of Jason's garb. It seemed to Mede as if the change of costume had changed the boy's sex and he questioned Hammond's approval of their intimacy. He pushed Jason from him and returned to his own pallet.

Crock's snores had subsided, but his breathing was heavy enough to be audible in the front of the barn. The horses occasionally stamped and switched. The ammoniac odor of fresh manure suffused the atmosphere. Mede lay on his back, knees bent, his hands behind his head.

A figure slunk through the barnyard. Mede descried it with palpitant heart He knew that it wasn't Hammond, since it didn't limp. Nor could it be Wallace, come to release Crock from his chain; the time seemed later to Mede than it was, but it was not near to morning he knew. As the figure drew near the Mandingo recognized it as the man with the beard whom he had seen at the grocery store in the afternoon. Mede was not this time precipitate. Although Mede had not been warned that the bearded man might be expected, he had no doubt of the legitimacy of his errand. He didn't stir from his pallet.

The white man entered the barn and hesitated until his eyes had adjusted to its darkness. He saw the Mandingo supine, believed him asleep and assumed he was chained as he had heard discussed in the afternoon. He also saw the figure in woman's dress reposing on the forward pallet and crept toward it. He threw himself beside Jason and grasped him securely around the body. Jason moved in his sleep, uttered an unintelligible sentence, and failed to wake. The bearded man rolled the boy squarely on his back and began his exploration beneath his skirt before Mede moved.

Mede was loth to interfere with the purposes of a white man; he had received no instruction about protecting Jason, who, after all, was only a buck; but, buck or wench, he wore a woman's garment which carried to Mede an implication of femaleness and frailty, a need of protection. Having to choose between errant judgment of omission and commission, he determined that action would displease his master less.

"God-damn stinkin' buck," muttered the white man. "Dogged if I didn't think it was a slut. That nigger is stole, he is stole. That's whut—prob'ly all stole. Dressin' bucks in slut's dress. I've caught me a nigger stealer."

The man had risen to his knees in his progress to his feet when he felt the Mandingo's heavy hands upon his shoulders and emitted a bellow of

startled rage. "Keep your god-damn, filthy, black han's offn me, you mammy-rapin' son-of-a-bitch," he commanded when he recovered from his fright. "I'll whup you to death, you varmint, darin' to touch a white man, whup you to death. You know no god-damned nigger dare lay han's on a white man. You god-damn baboon goin' to be whupped an' then burned. That whut we does to niggers in Alabam."

Mede's hands only tightened. They slid off the shoulders and grasped the arms, pulled them behind the man's back, held them in one hand and with the other arm clinched the white man about the waist and lifted him to his feet. The man kicked and struggled and cursed and commanded but to no avail. Mede held him in frothing impotence.

What to do with his captive confused the Mandingo. Should he turn the white man loose? What would be least likely to incur his master's blame? An open spancel hung above Mede's pallet, but he could not bring himself to close it around a white ankle. Lacking a decision, he simply held onto his prey, who, except for an occasional futile lurch, ceased to writhe or to struggle, but confined himself to a running fire of vile invective that was epic in its scope and poetic in its imagery. The more he cursed and lamented and threatened, the more resolved the Negro was to hold him for his master's disposal. In his effort to make the white man as comfortable as was compatible with his detention, Mede eased the fat fundament onto the upturned bucket where Hammond had sat, and knelt behind the man, pinioning his arms, and waited for relief.

Jason, awakened by the commotion, sat upright, his back against the wall, and stared, wide-eyed, at the bearded mouth from which the scurrility poured like a millrace, directed as it was to include not only Mede, but Hammond and all that pertained to him, Ellen, Jason, Charles and even Eclipse. It traduced the ancestors, the persons, and the descendants of them all. It criminated Hammond with every offense of which depravity is capable. The filth of the words was made more filthy by their utterance.

This *tour de force* of putridity was largely wasted upon the two Negroes since their vocabularies did not embrace most of the terms employed in it. They knew more from the manner than from the words that it was vituperative. Mede withstood the opprobrium directed at himself, but he was disturbed, deeply disturbed, at his maser's share of it, at the part he could attach a meaning to. He was once tempted to release the man to escape hearing his master bedaubed with the ordure that spattered off that filthy tongue.

To such mild and current epithets as "son-of-a-bitch," Mede attached an approximate meaning, and mumbled a mild rebuttal to their application to Hammond. His master was no son-of-a-bitch, Mede knew, and it was physically painful to him to hear the term applied to Hammond. "Masta, please, suh," he appealed; "You know my masta isn't a son-of-a-bitch, like you said. My masta's a gentleman, a rich gentleman. He's got a fine plantation and a big passel of fine niggers. We goin' there. Why, he's a friend of my old

masta. He cain't be a son-of-a-bitch. You wrong about my masta. Masta, suh, please, suh, don't call him that. You're mistaken." There was sorrow in the Negro's voice.

The protest only intensified the man's bootless anger, but his vocabulary of billingsgate was exhausted. He could think of nothing worse to call Hammond than he had already called him. His scurrility had reached its denouement. He had no more to say and fell silent for a time.

Later he began a plea to be let go. He didn't want Wallace to catch him there, argued the humiliation of being the prisoner of a nigger. His wife needed him, his children, poor Aristotle. He had only stopped by the barn to see that the Negroes were comfortable and happy. No ulterior motive had sullied his intentions. It would be useless for Mede to accuse him since no court would accept Negro testimony and no white man was perverted enough to take a nigger's word when it was controverted by a white. The man offered the Mandingo two-bits, four-bits, a dollar to release him, but Mede, unaware of the comparative value of coins, of which he had never had one, was not interested. Even Jason sensed the pathetic in the maudlin entreaties.

The night dragged its slow length along and Mercury, dimmed in the moonlight, rose as morning star. In the brief false dawn, Mede succumbed to boredom and lost his vigilance. The bearded man was alert to his chance. He painfully raised his gross body upon his puny legs, suddenly slipped his hands from Mede's relaxed grip, and took off across the barn lot. Mede at five strides had caught him and pinioned him again. They returned to the barn to await the morning. Jason went back to sleep.

The sun had not risen but the light was growing in the lifting mist when Wallace came through the barn lot to release Crock from his spancel and put him at his tasks. He was amazed to see the bearded man, his big, soft buttocks overflowing the upturned bucket, the Mandingo squatted behind him. "Whut you doin' here, Scruggs, this time?" he asked.

"I tell you they's stole, stole. I ketched 'em; they's stole. I reckoned it yestiday. Even the one in the dress is a buck—there ain't no slut amongst 'em. Make this nigger leave me loose."

"But whut you doin' here in my barn?"

"I was jest comin' by and I stopped to see that the niggers was all right, that Crock wasn't kilt by these stole niggers. Crock worth money; I jest a-watchin' out fer your prop'ty," the bearded Scruggs made his specious explanation.

"He came here tryin' to rape Jason, please, suh, Masta. I caught him and held him for you. I don't know what to do."

"Let that white man go, you black varmint. Turn loose of him before I kills you dead. You knows a black nigger cain't keep no white man. Let go, I says. Rape Jason? How a white man goin' to rape a nigger buck? Whut an' if he do? Let go on him."

Mede reluctantly released Scruggs, who rose with stiff difficulty from

his low seat, rubbed his massive rump, flexed his arms, and without further conversation or ceremony took off across the barn lot as fast as his small legs could carry his big body. At the gate, Scruggs met head-on with Hammond Maxwell who was unable to understand the surly glare in exchange for his genial greeting. He paused to watch the headlong man's top-heavy haste as he made toward his home.

Wallace stood chuckling in the barn entrance as Hammond crossed the lot. "That durned Scruggs," he explained, "snoopin' around your niggers, got hisself caught by the big buck."

"He tried to rape Jason," explained Mede.

"Thinkin' he Ellen, I reckon," added Hammond. "Why fer you let him go?"

"White Masta told me," shrugged Mede.

"Whut you crave to do to Scruggs, anyways?" asked Wallace. "He white, and he a good customer. Ain't nothin' to do with him, 'ceptin' leave him go."

"Reckon not, but if it had been Ellen—," Hammond never finished his sentence.

"How come the one in a dress a buck? Whut fer you put a dress on a buck?" Wallace asked suspiciously. "I reckoned you had a wench amongst 'em."

"The wench up at the store a-waitin'. I changed her to britches an' took her with me."

"An' Miz Lane, Miz Lane let you? Must a payed her a right smart. Miz Lane right moral."

"Miz Lane don't know."

The grocer guffawed and slapped his thigh at the circumvention of his neighbor's scruples. "But why fer you have me chain ol' Crock away from them bucks?"

"Bedded the wench down here at first. Come an' carried her to the house with me later."

"You won't git no breakfast, Miz Lane find out," the grocer chuckled. "Have to eat cheese and crackers along with me an' Crock. Reckon I better turn Crock free an' let him feed your hosses. You ridin' on this mornin'? Then I have him saddle 'em too."

Wallace disappeared toward the back of the barn, and Mede from the shadows approached Hammond. "Masta, suh, please, suh, I'm sorry I caught that white gentleman. I'm sorry, suh, I thought I do right, just like when I jumped you. I expect you going to flog me. Flog me good if you crave. I try to do right, Masta. I try to do right."

"Whut fer you thinks I goin' to flog you? I don't flog my niggers 'lessen they needs. You done right, done jest right. On'y thing you done wrong was turn that scoun'rel loose."

"The white gentleman told me to let him go. I didn't know what to do."

"Right, right, you done right. Always min' whut white man say. Reckon

couldn' prove nothin' agin' him noways. Jest skear him some."

Hammond walked back to rub the nose of Eclipse, who had stamped and nickered ever since his master's arrival. Wallace returned and the two white men walked together toward the grocery, followed by Hammond's Negroes. The sun had risen on a balmy day. The road was still gummy from yesterday's rain, but it was no longer muddy and was drying rapidly.

Charles and Ellen loitered on the grocer's porch, and Mrs. Lane stood in her open door livid with fury. "That slut was a buck when I turned you to bed. I felt of him an' I knows," she screamed at Hammond as he approached. "I won't have no sech goin's on in my house. I'm a respectable widder an' I'd have you know it."

"It still a buck. Cain't you see his britches?" said Hammond.

"I see his britches an' I see his breasts a-poppin' through his shirt. It a slut an' I know it a slut. I won't have no sech filthy mess, I won't have it," the small old woman shouted in her impotent anger.

"I don't know whut you talk about, Miz Lane," Hammond evaded her wrath.

"You knows all right, you knows," she said, shifting her weight rapidly from leg to leg and back again. "I wouldn't give you no breakfast, 'ceptin' it already stirred and I cain't throw it to the hog. I wouldn't feed no sech filthy white trash fer no money. Reckon you both had her, both straddled her one after the other all night on my bed. It ruint; bed plumb ruint."

Ellen knew that she was the object of the abuse but was unable to understand the reason for it. She had but obeyed her master. She sobbed. Wallace retreated into the store but stood in the door, listening in his suppressed amusement to the tirade.

"Cost you an extrie two-bits. That's whut it will. Three on you in bed. I wouldn't a charged you aught fer the buck on the floor, but the slut in the bed will jest cost you; that's whut it will—jest cost you," Mrs. Lane continued as Hammond walked away and took his position on the porch across the road. "And, I tell you whut's more, I wouldn't sell you Flora even an' you wanted to buy her, not even hardly an' you begged me to take five hunnert dollars fer her. Flora ain't that kind of a nigger an' I wouldn't sell her a-knowin' she was goin' to be used like that. I won't have Flora a-caperin' around in no britches."

If Hammond were deficient in his sense of humor, the idea of Flora's capering was yet sufficient to cause him to laugh, at which Mrs. Lane, baffled, banged shut the door with all her strength. Immediately she opened it again and called, "You kin come in to breakfast and send the niggers around to git theirn."

Breakfast proved to be a duplicate of the two previous meals, and Hammond wondered whether Mrs. Lane never ate anything but ham and eggs. There was one difference; Mrs. Lane did not occupy the rocking chair by the window.

"Mist'ess right riled, she shore right riled," lisped Flora, dragging her leg around the table to serve the hot biscuits. "I speck she goin' to hide me, once you gen'lemens ride ahead."

"Whut you do?" asked Hammond without interest.

"Didn' do nuffin, not nuffin. She riled acause o' you havin' your slut. She ain't got no man. 'Haps, an' you pays her, she satisfy an' not flail Flora. Cain't tell. You a-goin' to pay honest, ain't you, Masta, suh?"

Hammond affirmed that such was his intention, and after breakfast he found Mrs. Lane waiting in the front room to collect her money. Hammond gave her a gold five dollars, for which she had no change. They were forced to take the slug across the road to Wallace, who was also unable to change the coin; but, since Ham owed the grocer for the horses' keep and for the Negroes' pallets, Mrs. Lane and Wallace were satisfied to keep the five dollars to be divided between them later, and Hammond fished out of his pocket the small change to meet the balance of the grocer's bill.

Crock led the horses to the grocery, where the white men mounted first, after which they drew up to the side of the porch from which the Mandingo boosted the smaller Negroes aboard. Ellen was still uneasy at her transvestation and Jason even more embarrassed, but Hammond ordained that each should retain the other's habiliments. In pants, the wench would be better able to straddle the horse, and the young buck could pull his dress clear up over his thighs if need be without offense to whoever might chance to see them.

The morning was fresh and the hour was early when they rode away, the Mandingo trotting easily beside the horses. Old Crock had returned to the barn and was leaning heavily on the fence, waving at the party as it passed. Jason turned and raised his hand, but the others ignored the old slave's farewell.

They had gone not more than five hundred yards when the road veered to the right without apparent reason and a weathered clapboard house sat back from it amid a clump of trees, weeds and bushes. Aristotle Scruggs hung against the frail upright that supported the stoop as if in turn to support the prop. A hundred feet further, and a shot reverberated. They looked up to see the bearded man retreating toward the house as fast as he could run, carrying a long fowling piece with a flaring barrel, a weapon long outmoded.

The party riding slowly made an easy target and the range was short. Either the gun was not true or the shooter's aim was bad, since nobody was scathed. Perhaps, Hammond thought, Scruggs intended merely to frighten them and had deliberately missed. It was his vengeance for the injury his white ego had suffered from the Negro's arrest of him.

Charles was for turning back and setting the Mandingo on Scruggs, but Hammond wished to avoid further complications. He had had enough and was jealous of wasted time.

Another half mile and they reached what was normally a ford across a

nameless creek but which now ran turbid and muddy from yesterday's rain and which was still rising. There was no other way to cross than to swim the horses and the slaves.

"Ellen, you and Jason slide off the hosses an' shuck down. Hand me up your trogs and I'll tote 'em dry acrost," ordered Hammond.

"I don't know how to swim," objected Ellen.

"I cain't swim either," Jason said.

"That case, Mede, you take the wench acrost a-straddle your neck. We'll throw the buck in an' learn him; cain't learn no littler. You'll dry out runnin'; ain't no need fer you to peel down."

"Thoughten he want to show the wench his meat," interposed Charles.

"Ellen kin git along without seein' no nigger meat," Hammond scoffed. "Better wade in, Mede, an' see how fur these hosses kin go on the bottom an' how fur they goin' to haf to swim. Mud purty slab and soft like."

Except for the space of the road through them, willows and alders lined the near bank, the lower parts of many of them covered by the risen waters. The far bank was wooded with larger trees, sycamores near the creek, oaks and hickories beyond. How far the forest extended, Hammond had no way to know.

Jason removed his dress and handed it folded to his master, who stuffed it under the front of his saddle. Jason shivered in his nakedness, not from cold but from the fear of being forced into the water. Ellen removed her shirt and sat on the ground beside the road to strip off her pants, which were so tight that they left an imprint of their seams on her flesh. She was less embarrassed by her nudity than by the bifureation of her clothes. Jason picked up her two garments and handed them to Hammond.

Mede waded fifty feet into the creek before the water reached his neck, and then plunged in and swam back to shore. "Awful muddy," he reported. "Horses liable to sink down."

"We has got to try. Not goin' to git better," Hammond resolved. "Stoop down and let Ellen straddle yo' neck. Nev' min' his wet clothes. Cain't he'p wettin' anyway. Tote her high as you kin, Mede. Don't git her wetter than you kin he'p."

Ellen held to Mede's wool and wrapped her plump legs around his body. Mede waded into the creek as far as he was able, swam through the deepest channel without effort and waded out on the other bank. He stooped to permit the wet girl to dismount from his shoulders, after which he returned to lead Hammond's horse into the water. Eclipse backed away from the stream, but between Hammond's booting and Mede's yanking he was forced to plunge into the mud. He sank well nigh to his knees in the mire and to his belly in the water before he came to the point from which it was necessary to swim. Hammond was hampered by his stiff knee from raising his legs to avoid the water. He had drawn up his trousers to the knee, and water slopped into his boots, but he was little inconvenienced.

Hammond safely across the creek, Mede went back once more for Charles and his horse.

"Throw that buck in. No good wastin' time. Come on, Jason; you gotta learn," called Hammond from the far side.

Jason stood naked on the bank, shoulders hunched forward, arms folded. He was afraid. He waded into the stream until the water reached his mid-thighs and then went back to the bank.

"Pitch him in, Mede, an' stop his foolishment," called Hammond.

Mede ran his arms between the boy's legs, grasped his neck with the other hand and eased Jason headlong into the water. Then he grasped the bridle of the gelding, Charles still mounted, and led it down the slippery bank. Jason walked out into the water until it reached his nipples, when he lost his footing and fell. He came up splashing rather than swimming, emitting sounds of terror and despair. The Mandingo swerved Charles' horse to help the boy. Charles, amused at Jason's struggling, commanded Mede to let Jason alone, but the big Negro, aware of Jason's danger as well as of his fright, waded on to the rescue. He grasped the threshing boy by his left ear and held his head above the surface and, thus, letting go of the horse from time to time in order to swim, conducted the horse and boy safely to shore.

Charles watched Ellen as she drew on her pants. "Ain't never seen that wench nekid yet before. She right likely," he said. "Makes me horny like."

"You kin stay horny, all I cares, but you let that wench be," warned Hammond; and added casually enough, "You touch that wench and I'm goin' to kill you. Hear?"

"I reckon I kin wait to Falconhurst," answered Charles.

"Ever. I means ever. Don't touch her. Don't ever finger her—Falconhurst of anywhures."

"I reckon you got otherns," said Charles. "You right taken of this one. An' you don' glut of her afore Blanche come, Blanche kill her; you watch, take a hog knife and cut her belly clean outn her. Blanche sure pizen."

"Blanche white lady. She ain't a-mindin' no nigger."

"Blanche pizen."

"Shuck down and wrench your clo's and wring 'em afore we starts, Mede," said Hammond, diverting the subject. "An', Jason, scrape the mud offn your laigs an' git into that dress. Gits you to the Tombigbee, have to learn you swimmin'."

With Mede's assistance, Ellen and Jason resumed their places behind the white men on the horses, which their riders put in motion, the Mandingo trotting behind putting on his wet shirt as he went. The half mile through the bottom wooded country was overgrown, rough, and the footing uncertain. Hammond, at the head of the column, walked his horse, choosing his way.

When the party emerged from under the trees into the level, open coun-

try, the horses broke into a canter and Mede had to extend his stride to keep up with them. He had not been aware of the chill, but he shivered with satisfaction when he felt the warm sunshine on his shoulders through his wet shirt.

"Reckon whut the matter with this geldin'?" asked Charles, reining in his mount after a short distance. "He limpin'."

Hammond looked back. "Sure is," he said. "Better git down and look. Liable a stone caught in his foot. Jason, pile off."

Examination revealed a hole just forward of the Achilles tendon, extending clear through the leg. "That shot back yander. Consarn!" swore Hammond. "How you reckon that hoss come this fur not showin' lame?"

"He shy some when shot fire," said Charles, "but never know he hit. Le's us go back an' git that white man."

"Nev' mind," said Hammond. "Let bad enough alone. Git a nigger shot next time. Don't want we should lose no time."

"Reckon I kin ride him?"

"No help," Ham shrugged. "But the buck cain't. We'll put the little 'un on the big 'un. Stoop down, Mede, an' take this Jason on your back. Reckon you kin tote him?"

"Sure can, Masta, suh. Jason weigh nothing. Not that way, Jason. Clear up, your legs around my neck." The Mandingo rose to his feet without effort. He pulled the younger boy's right leg and heaved his shoulders, the better to equalize their burden. The skirt was in the way and had to be pulled up and tucked about the boy's waist.

Charles remounted his lame horse. The girl, with what help Mede could give her without spilling the boy from his back, scrambled up behind her master.

Progress was slow, but it was not again interrupted. The party stopped at a cabin for dinner, which consisted only of pone and cracklings but which was set forth with such hospitable good will that it was palatable and satisfying. The cabin housed a moustached man, his skinny wife, and their mouse-faced, long-legged daughter, barely nubile, who stared hungrily at Charles and made tentative but futile efforts to flirt with him. In spite of their poverty, which was apparent, their persons seemed clean, even to their bare feet, and the interior of the one-roomed house was tidy and neat.

The woman was offended at Hammond's offer to pay for the meals, and was amply compensated by the answers to personal questions—where they had come from, where they were going, what they were going to do with the Negroes, how many they had, why the shift in clothes between Jason and Ellen, whether the wench was pregnant, whether the white men had wives. Hammond was embarrassed by the woman's refusal of his money, which he knew she needed; and surreptitiously he slipped two silver dollars into the hand of the girl, who accepted them readily.

The host was impressed by the Mandingo. "Finest nigger I ever see,"

he declared, running his hand over Mede's shoulders, pinching his thigh and opening his mouth to explore his teeth. "Sure a purty boy. How much you got to pay fer a buck liken that 'un?"

"Twenty-seven hundert and fifty dollars," Hammond answered truthfully.

"Um, um. Hear that, Ma? Twenty-seven hundert; a lot of money, but he worth it, he shore is worth it, an' I ever see one."

"Ain't no nigger worth that much," said the woman. "Honest? Twenty-seven fifty?"

"Honest," replied Ham.

"I had me a slut oncet, a long time ago it wuz, but she up an' die on me, died a-foalin', her an' her sucker, a little buck, too. Hain't got no money to buy me no niggers sence that, but I shore hone to git me a start in 'em. Wisht I had a good breedin' slut. Soon have a yard full on 'em. Couldn't keep no buck around, of course, because of the gal here. She wouldn't let no buck alone an' I wouldn't want her messin' with no nigger."

"A white woman wouldn't let a nigger touch her," said Ham, horrified.

"This 'un would. Cain't hardly fight her offn me, my own self, an' I'm her pappy—reckon so anyways—but I won't even finger her a little. I swear I won't—promised the old woman. Brings puny young 'uns anyways, a pappy and his own gal does, or I hearn tell."

"Sure enough does," said Charles, eyeing the girl, tempted mildly.

"My brother over in Coffee County got two nice sluts, a mammy an' her young one. An' he die an' leave 'em to me, an' I ride 'em over to your place at Falconhurst, kin I git you to have this buck cover 'em?" inquired the man.

"Sure will, sure will, both on 'em. Won't cost you a cent," Hammond promised.

"Course," the man sighed, "my brother ain't even down sick, as I knows on. Yet an' still, he shakes ever' spring with ager. Might kick it, you know. I'll sure remember that big buck, an' if he do."

Not two miles further, the party found a considerable town, a score of houses, stores, and a tavern where they might have obtained a better meal, but nobody was hungry. As they approached the hamlet, Hammond commanded Jason to get down from Mede's shoulders, pull down his skirt, and run alongside the horses until they should pass through the peopled community.

The gelding still limped, but the lameness grew no worse. Hammond, anxious to reach home, was impatient of the slow-down, but made no complaint, except occasionally to curse Scruggs. Charles was, at worst, content; he had escaped parental restraints, and he had a collateral interest, purely sentimental, it was true, in a fighting buck, a buck so splendid that his boy's heart swelled with pride and his head was full of visions of vicarious conquest. He watched with satisfaction the Mandingo swinging effortlessly down

the road with Jason on his shoulders. Charles regretted his horse's lameness more because it forestalled seeing how far and how fast Mede could run than because of the injury to the horse itself. Hammond would not have countenanced such a test, but Charles did not suspect it.

The party progressed slowly but steadily. The leisurely pace fatigued Mede more than a more rapid one might have done, but he frequently ran ahead a quarter of a mile and lay down in the weeds, Jason by his side, while he waited for the horses to catch up. In the course of the afternoon, they passed a good many houses, including three considerable plantations with large barns and numerous Negro cabins. Hammond had heard his father mention planters in this district and he speculated about whom the various places might belong to but was unwilling to spare the time to ride up to the houses to make sure. He knew that a call would involve food and an importunity to spend the night. It would be a waste of daylight and would delay the advance. At irregular intervals, the party came upon crossroads and settlements of a store and four or five houses or larger hamlets of a dozen or more habitations.

The shadows grew long and Hammond despaired of finding a place to stay the night. The cabins they passed were too small and too squalid to accommodate so many persons, and towns had ceased. At length they approached a house somewhat larger than any they had passed in more than an hour, and Hammond turned in. A nondescript, black-and-white cur ran out and barked at the horses, advancing with the hair of its back bristling and tail in air, and then slinking back toward the house, with tail tucked, an alternating ambivalence between valor and discretion. The barking prompted a surly man to open the door through which behind him could be seen a bevy of children of various ages, peering out in frightened curiosity.

Without waiting to hear Ham's mission, the man refused his unspoken request. "No use a-gittin' down," he growled. "Ye cain't stay. Ain't got no room fer ye. Go 'long. Ol' woman an' twelve children with another a-comin' is all the cabin will hold. Ain't no use a-talkin', I won't have ye."

He closed the door without giving Hammond a chance to say a word. The house was obviously too small to accommodate so large a family, even without guests, but its owner's truculence was more forbidding than the smallness of the house. While Hammond hesitated before he turned his horse, the door opened again.

"Mayhap, Pierce will take you in an' you're clean. He does sometimes," the man volunteered.

"Pierce?"

"Yes. Down the road a piece. But he charges. Don't expect to squat there fer nothin'." The man closed the door again and there was no reason to linger.

The piece down the road was just short of two miles, and Hammond had despaired of finding the house, when he discerned in the darkness which

had fallen, a large log cabin well back from the road in a treeless field of blighted weeds. Both horses were tired and the limp of the gelding had increased so much as to threaten his further usefulness as they turned into the eroded and overgrown lane that led to the dreary habitation.

Hammond led the way into the premises with misgivings about the reception he would receive, and had come within fifty feet of the great cabin when the door opened and, outlined by the firelight behind him, appeared in silhouette a Negro youth, whose smutty blackness was visible even in the as yet moonless dark, so fat that his flesh sagged in folds on his bones, and unashamed in his utter nakedness.

"Mista Pierce live here?" demanded Hammond of the apparition.

Instead of answering the question, the black boy retreated from the door at what but for his fatness would have been a gallop, calling half in glee and half in fear, "White gen'mans! White gen'mans! White gen'mans!"

"Take they bridles, take they bridles," Hammond heard a command from within the house and a cadaverous creature, so tall that he found it necessary to duck his head, came out the door. "Git down, git down, git down and light," he said genially. "Shote, barn them hosses. He'll barn 'em good, never you fret. He'll barn 'em and bed 'em and feed 'em an' water 'em. Come in, Come in."

"You Mista Pierce, suh?" asked Hammond.

"I'm him. Come in."

"Kin we git some supper and waste the night, me and Mista Woodford?"

"Right honored, suh; right honored. Course you kin. Git down, suh. Git down and come in."

"Got some niggers along. Whut will I do with 'em. Barn 'em with the hosses? One's a wench."

"Fetch 'em in, fetch 'em in. Keep my niggers right in the cabin whure I kin watch over 'em and take keer on 'em. Bring yourn right on in."

Ellen slipped from the crupper. Hammond and Charles dismounted, and Mede lifted Jason to the ground. Hammond walked back to examine the leg of Charles' horse, which showed little swelling and no inflammation. The party entered the house and the naked, fat Negro boy led the horses toward the barn behind it.

The house was a single, large room with an earthen floor. A fire burned vividly in the fireplace that occupied one end of the room, and a bedstead made of saplings occupied the opposite side. Home-hewn benches standing on each side of the home-hewn table, and stools on each side the fire were the only furniture. As the guests entered, the Negroes in the room, except two, a boy and a girl of some two or three years, retreated to the side of the room away from the fire, whence they peered bashfully and curiously at the strangers. A stout black man of some forty years, a brown heavily made woman, and a brown girl of about twelve wore scant clothing. The six children, of various shades of duskiness, the youngest two probably quadroons, were

nude. Pierce was barefooted and clothed but little better than his slaves.

"Come in and set," he invited. "You all tuckered. Set." His hospitality was not lessened by the paucity of his accommodations. Hammond and Charles seated themselves on the stools beside the fire, and Pierce continued, "Belle, you go out an' git three, four them squawkers outn that tree, wring 'em an' fix 'em. We through eatin', but it won't take long to bile you some chickens. That all right? That do?"

"That is fine, suh. Anything," answered Hammond. "Thought we couldn't find a nightin' place. Glad to git anything at all."

"Glad you come, suh. Glad you come. Gits right lonesome sence my woman die, jest me and the niggers. Course, they right good company, but, howsomever, glad you come."

The Maxwell Negroes stood just inside the door, uncertain about what they were expected to do, until the host beckoned them with both arms and said, "Come and set; gether up to the fire. Don't git backward. Black meat gits cold and tired jest the same like white meat. Gether up. Ain't nothin' here too fine haired fer niggers to hurt."

"It's all right. You kin come to the fire. Cain't you hear whut the gen'leman say?" Hammond seconded the invitation. "Set around on the floor."

"Right likely lookin' servants," commented Pierce, drawing up a stool for himself. "Jist git 'em?"

"Yes, from old Mista Wilson of Coign Plantation."

"Ain't never hearn on him. You ain't a buyer, I reckon?" Pierce unwound his curiosity.

"No, I bought 'em fer seed. My name is Maxwell, Hammond Maxwell, of Falconhurst Plantation over Benson way. This is Mista Charles Woodford of Crowfoot."

"Maxwell, eh? Falconhurst, eh? I been a-hearin' 'bout you-ll from away back, about you-ll's fine niggers. Ain't no better lot of niggers, folks says, in the whole state of Alabam than yourn—an' I believe 'em. Knowed you wasn't no buyers, jest by lookin' at you. Gent'man. Gent'man, fer sartin."

Hammond was not quite confident of Pierce's taxonomy, but he let gentility go by default.

"Not that I got nothin' agin buyers. Some well actin' buyers, but they's not gent'men. Course, I not gent'man, my own self, though the Pierces air blooded, an' I'm knowin' how to ack, out an' around. Don't put on none, here at home. At home, I jest ack common-like."

"Fire real comfortin'," declared Hammond. "Still chilly out of nights."

"Prince," called Pierce to his adult slave, "shoo them young 'uns up to the fire. They ketch their death back in that dark corner without no coverin'. Then you go out an' git us a gourd of corn licker outn that barrel. I 'most fergot to fetch out the corn while Belle biles the supper. Corn tastes real good a night like this 'un."

As the children came toward the fire, Pierce reached out and caught a

black six-year-old boy, apparently at random, kissed the back of his neck, set the child on his tall knees, and began to tease and tickle him. The boy squirmed away from his master and rolled on the floor, where the master continued to prod him with his soiled bare feet and to roll him over.

Belle came in and made her way through the throng to place her kettle of chicken on the fire. It was apparent that supper would not be soon, but also that it would be ample when it at length should be ready.

The fat youth who had taken the horses returned and crowded toward the fire, at which his master administered two resounding slaps with his hand across the obese black buttocks. The boy retreated to the outer fringe of the group, wrinkling his face spasmodically as if to cry until the master cautioned him, "Shote, you, don' you bawl. You gittin' too big to bawl. That fer saplin's." The surprise of the mild chastisement was greater than the pain, as the master's temptation at so broad a target had been greater than his anger at the black boy's intrusion. The white man smiled at the boy as he reprimanded him, and the boy responded with all his teeth in a shamed grin.

"You bait them hosses?" Pierce asked.

"Yas, suh."

"Good? Corn?"

"Yas, suh."

"An' you water 'em?"

"Yas, suh."

"An' bed 'em, good and thick, like I tol' you?"

"Yas, suh. But one of 'em cripped. I didn't do it."

"I knows," interposed Hammond.

"An' t'othern make like to bite me. I never done nuffin! Him mean!"

"Eclipse don't like black, musky niggers," explained Hammond.

"That the whole hoss? Whole hosses cain't to be trust."

"Better than geldings," Hammond argued. "Cain't never trust no gelding."

"Whole hosses an' whole niggers treach'ous," maintained Pierce. "I reckonin' on callin' out the verter'nary an' havin' these little bucks all cut. Course, Shote here is too big fer it to do him no good. He harmless like, anyways; ain't heavy hung."

"My papa cain't abide no altered hoss, nor cut nigger, neither," Hammond cited his ultimate authority.

"All that's holdin' me back is Belle there. These chillun all hern, and she don't relish me to do it to 'em. Won't pain 'em much, no more than it hurt a steer or a barrow hog."

From Belle, who was scraping yams in the darkness beyond the firelight, arose a protest. "You cuts them little bucks, Masta—you cain't cut 'em, you jest cain't. I'll, I'll—"

Prince returned with his great gourd of whiskey, which he carried in his left hand. Overhearing Belle's protest, Prince swung his open right hand and brought the palm across the woman's cheek. "Dry up," he adjured. "Dry up.

Them children Masta's; ain't yourn. He cravin' to whittle 'em, he whittle 'em. Best thing fer saplin' bucks—best thing. Save 'em from growin' up bad niggers like that young buck of yourn Masta had to sell las' year fer tryin' to mess with young Mist'ess afore she die. Dry up."

Prince crossed to the fire and handed the gourd to his master, who tasted the whiskey ceremoniously before passing the gourd to his guests.

"You right, Prince," Pierce said. "An' my paw had of cut that Ram varmint when he was little, before he come randy, I never would a sol' him off; never."

"Corn taste right good—cold night," commented Hammond, wiping his lips with the back of his hand as he passed the gourd across the fireplace to Charles.

"Yas, suh, Mista Maxwell," the host continued. "My woman die las' year—young like too, on'y twenty. I, my own self, twenty-six, goin' on twenty-seven about; not quite sure how old. But she on'y twenty, an' purty, purty as ever you see." He interrupted his narrative to accept the gourd from Charles, and to take a prolonged swallow from it, offer it again to Hammond, who shook his head in refusal, and then to pass the whiskey to Prince, who drank deeply. Prince moved a step toward Mede, at the same time extending the gourd.

Hammond reached for it. "No corn fer my niggers. Don't crave 'em to have none of it," he declared. "I'm temp'ance; that is, I'm temp'ance fer niggers. White man kin do whut he like, but whiskey stunt a nigger from growin'."

"Good fer 'em," Pierce contradicted. "Mine gits it ever' day, jist like I does. When you gits through, Prince, let Shote have a swig, an' on down. Don' fergit Belle an' the baby. Then fetch another gourdful."

"You was sayin' 'bout your wife—" Hammond prompted.

"So I wuz, so I wuz," Pierce resumed. "As I say, purty an' lovin', my Lily wuz; till all at once she got puny. Didn't seem nothin' the matter, but jest puny an' punier until she down an' died. I calculate she was jest skeared into it by that varmint, whut I calculate. White ladies that way, you know."

"Sure do," agreed Hammond, not to betray his ignorance of white women.

"You know I heired this here cabin an' the ground and Prince an' Belle an' her young—that is, this Ram varmint I tellin' about, an' Shote here, an' that little Martha slut over there, all from my paw, when he died. Martha wasn't much more than a sucker that time; she goin' on thirteen now and beginnin' to breasten out. Course, she black, but, an' she breastens good, she be as likely a piece as a white man could crave for. I ain't rid her yet, but, with my woman dead, I ain't goin' to wait much longer. Ol' Belle ain't much good no more; good enough fer Prince, but not fer no white man."

"'Bout your wife?" insisted Hammond.

"Oh, yes, her. As I was sayin', I heired Prince an' ol' Belle, and their biggest three. The others I bred myself out of Belle—by Prince, I reckon, though I might had somethin' to do with them two tall, light-toned ones. I

don't know. But whut I'm a-gittin' at, is Paw never had Ram an' Shote cut when they was saplin's; let 'em grow up whole niggers like they was born. Coarse, Shote there is too fat an' lazy to be dang'ous, but one day las' summer, we was all out in the fiel' choppin', an' Ram, he missin'. All to oncet, I heard Lily, here in the cabin, screamin'. Me an' Prince run to the house fast as we could hop clods, an' then we found Ram had Lily down a-feelin' on her. A minute more an' he'd a been on her sure."

"You shot him, of course?" asked Charles.

"Mad enough to. Fact is, couldn't find no gun. No, I didn't shoot him, but I snaked him good. Prince held him an' I snaked him. On'y time I ever whup a nigger in my whole life—that is, whup one hard. Lots of times I switches these little buggers or spanks 'em, has to, but never skun one down with the snake before. First buyer come along after his back side heal up, I sole him, sole him fer jest whut he would fetch. Didn't hesitate one minute, but sole him. Love him an' petted him all his life; never thought of sellin' him, but I sole him an' never cried none when the buyer drove him away."

"I'd not a hided him an' a sole him to pester somebody else's wife. I'd a hung him up to a tree and a-built a fire under him," said Hammond. "An' I'd a-made all these other niggers go out an' watch him kick an' holler while he burn. I'd made a sample of him, learn these other bucks to not touch white ladies."

"That's right, suh; that's right. Learn 'em," Prince agreed.

"I thinkin' of that, but it jest burnin' up seven hunderd dollars. That's whut the buyer give me. Could a got eight hunderd, 'ceptin' fer them whales on his back after that snakin'. He big strong sixteen year buck. Couldn't stan' burnin' up so much money. I don' sell my niggers. I loves 'em, an' pets 'em, an' keeps 'em. But, an' you gits a bad 'un—"

"You cain't do nothin' with a bad one 'ceptin' to kill it," affirmed Hammond dogmatically.

"Lily didn't never git over bein' skeared. She skeared of me, never let me put hand on her again. She skeared of ol' Prince, skeared even of fat Shote. Jest punied an' died. That why I sure goin' to send fer that vet'inary an' have them little bucks nutted afore they too big an' begin pesterin'."

"Shote ain't too big. Masta. Nut Shote too, might as well," insisted Prince. "Too many complete bucks runnin' loose, usin' up wenches from us stock niggers."

Shote began to cry. "No, no, no," he bawled. "Masta not goin' to, Masta not goin' hurt me with no knife. I ain't like ol' Ram. I good, I good nigger. No, no, no," he howled, stamping his big, flat feet and shaking the flesh of his jelly-fat belly.

Prince reached out his arm and, grasping a leg, drew the fat buck toward him. Running his hand between the black legs, he said, "Reckon he ain't too big if we takes it off clean. Cain't risk him pesterin' that Marth. Won't hurt him, not much."

Mede sat silent on the floor devouring the conversation, wide eyed. Ellen, sitting back in the shadows, failed to comprehend the meaning of it. Jason had fallen asleep on the floor beside Charles' stool, his arm flung unconsciously across the white man's lap.

"That wench of yourn real tired out. Sluts don' travel good. She sleepin' right soun'," Pierce changed his topic and nodded toward Jason. "She right light an' be right purty oncet she asses out an' breastens up some. You ridin' her yet? Or is she hisn?"

Hammond chuckled at his host's error. "That 'un ain't no wench. She over thar in the dark. That sleepin' one a buck."

Charles, amused, reached down and pulled up Jason's skirt for Pierce to see. Jason stirred and sat upright, rubbing his eyes.

"Well, I swan," said Pierce in surprise. "I been settin' here a-quanderin' if I couldn't trade you out en her—I mean it, him—fer two or three or four of these here saplin's. An' you got to turn it upside down, I reckon as how I don' wants it. Ruther keep Marth."

"Reckon Jason be more like a wench than a buck, savin' whut he got in his crotch," Hammond conceded.

"He mine," bragged Charles. "That is, Cousin Hammond goin' to ast his papa kin I have him fer my body nigger, oncet we gits to Falconhurst."

"Whut fer you got a dress on a buck, like that?" asked Pierce. "No won'er I guessed a slut, wearin' a dress."

Hammond explained the convenience of breeches for Ellen's riding astride as the reason for the exchange of costumes, and summoned Ellen from her retirement in the shadows. "This 'un is the wench," he announced proudly.

"I ha'dly see that one at all, back in that dark. Cain't fool nobody 'bout her, even an' you put all the britches in kingdom come on her. That sure a harmonious tan slut, assed an' breasted an ever'thin'." Pierce sat forward on his stool and extended his arm to run his hand down Ellen's leg. "Reckon you wouldn't like to swap this 'un. Give you my Marth, and this fat Shote, to boot, an' might throw in one or two these other little sluts or bucks, either one, fer measure, an' if yourn dress down purty without no clo's. Give anything I got fer a one like that. Ain't got no money to offer, an' know you don' want Belle or ol' Prince here in your herd of fine young niggers, ever'body say you-all got."

With satisfaction and without indignation Hammond declined the offer. Amusement lurked in the muscles of his face, the suppression of a smile, that anyone should seek to get Ellen away from him.

"Right good bargain—three or four fer one. Whyn't you take him up, Hammond? That Marth is jest as good—soon will be." Charles was avid for action, change, exchange, conflict of bodies or of wills. Hammond ignored his companion's advice.

"Ain't that chicken an' them yams cooked yet? You gen'men must be ravenin' hongry," Pierce declared truly. The odors from the pot on the fire

filled the whole room. "Git another gourdful, Prince, while Belle dishes out the vittles."

"Them chickens tough, but I reckon they done now," observed Belle, making her way to the fire. "I'll take up, an' you say, Masta."

While she did so, Prince brought more whiskey and the gourd went around. After the whites had drunk their fill, the gourd was passed to Prince, Shote, Martha, and one eight-year-old buck who had remained awake. Belle was too busy in the preparation of supper to claim her draught, and Hammond did not relax his principles to permit his Negroes to drink.

"Coursen, I don't hanker after bucks much, but that big 'un you got is powerful powerful. Whut you got to lay out fer one like that? Must be right costive." Pierce pointed toward Mede.

"Twenty-seven hundert dollars; yas, suh. Twenty-seven hundert." Hammond truthfully boasted. "Come out here, Mede."

"Um! Um!" exclaimed Pierce. "Niggers sure high. That much fer jest a buck! Think on it! Stud, I reckon? Ought to bring good hands, though it awful dark."

"Mandingo, full-bred Mandingo," said Hammond.

"Goin' to fight him," Charles proclaimed. "Had ought to fight good. Think so?"

"Had ought to," Pierce agreed. "Mandingo, eh? I been hearin' they good niggers. Never see one before, not a pure one. I swan, he thick chested an' powerful. All on 'em like this one?"

"No. Mandingos all good, but this one fancy—not a blemish, not a pimple." Hammond in his enthusiasm yanked at Mede's shirt and gestured to him to strip, which the boy was proud to do. "Not a pimple."

"Um! Um! No, suh, not a pimple," repeated Pierce with admiration as he caressed Mede's burnished flesh. Mede shifted rapidly from foot to foot in the tension of examination, proud in his beauty, stallion-like in his grace. "Sure purty," continued Pierce. "Not a pound of extra meat on him anywhures. Flat assed as a board, an' hard bellied. Shoulders like a bull, an' hung like one. How's his mouth?"

"Teeth good," declared Ham, as Pierce ran his finger into Mede's mouth.

"Soun' as a houn' dog's," was his verdict. "Um! Um!"

"Put on your trogs, Mede, lessen you catch your death," commanded his owner.

"Tell you whut. Belle, she open now. Le's us put her to your buck whiles you 'uns eats your supper," the host proposed. "If'n you will, supper an' the night won't cost you a cent, not a cent. Mayhap I take a twenty-seven hundert dollar sucker outn Belle. Anyways Belle will like it, even an' Prince don't, an' besides I should joy to see that buck wiggle. Whut say?"

"I reckon not," Hammond declined the offer. "Mede tired; been a-runnin' all day."

"Oncet, jest oncet won't hurt him none. Won't you? Supper won't cos'

you a cent."

"Let him, Cousin Hammond," urged Charles. "You not too tired, Mede, is you?"

"No, suh, I not too tired," replied the Negro, his ardor in check, "but what Masta says."

"I wants to save him, kind of, to show him off to Papa. I reckon not," Hammond qualified the finality of his decision.

Belle had apportioned the food into six round pans and spread them evenly along the rough, bare table for six places.

"We all done et, but it late, an' reckon I kin gnaw another leg. Draw up, draw up," Pierce invited. "Have to set on these here benches—all we got. Call up your niggers, suh."

"I ain't goin' to eat alongside no niggers," Charles hastened to affirm.

"They all will take they pans an' set on the floor by the fire—keep warm," Hammond appeased Charles. "Come here an' tote these pans, Jason. Give one to Ellen and one to Mede."

"Have it how you likes. Hadn't thought about not settin' you with your servants. Well, me an' Prince an' all of 'em eats alike," declared the host, slightly vexed at Charles' scruples. "Don't hurt me none. Reckon we all et outn a nigger when we was little an' liked it; reckon it ain't pizen to eat alongside one now."

"'Tain't that, 'tain't that," mollified Hammond. "But they chill easy-like. Better by the fire."

The chicken was indeed stringy muscled, but was cooked so done that it fell apart from the bones. With it were hot yams and coarse, cold pone; but the party was too hungry to be critical. The belated meal tasted good.

Shote and the other child who remained awake crowded about their master, begging for food. Pierce fumbled on his plate for a chicken neck to give the younger, and shared with Shote alternate bites from a leg, to the undisguised disgust of Charles. When the meat was gone, Pierce handed the bone to the young Negro to suck. The boy, unsatisfied with the handout from his master, returned to the fireplace to tease food from Hammond's Negroes. Mede bent jealously over his too meager ration and pulled his pan closer toward him; Ellen contributed some bones, half-sucked; but Jason, unable to resist the fat boy's solicitation, gave him fully half the contents of his pan, which his appetite prompted him to keep for himself but which his compassion moved him to share.

Prince had no such compassion. Seeing his son's preemption of Jason's victuals and knowing his greed, Prince raised his hand above the kneeling obese rump and let it descend with all the strength he could summons. "Begone outn here. You 'ready et, you Shote, you. Don' give him no more; drive him off. You needs your dinner fer your own self. That Shote eat all he kin beg. He so wide out now he cain't hardly walk. Don' give him no more."

So intent was Shote upon cramming Jason's food into his maw that he

only momentarily flinched from the blow and it became necessary for Prince to grasp him by the neck and fling him across the room to get him out of the way and permit Jason to eat his supper in peace.

The meal, for all its shortcomings, was gulped without ceremony, as well by the whites at the table as by the slaves before the fire. The white men had already risen when Belle began scraping the broken food on a single plate for Shote, after which she and Prince lifted the table and benches against the rear wall to make room for the company to sleep before the fire.

"They on'y one bed. I reckon it will bear up all three on us," Pierce announced what was apparent. "Your niggers has to lay before the fire like mine."

"I reckon I'll only shed my coat an' pull my boots," said Ham. "Jason, you he'p me. Ellen, you crawl over here close beside the bed an' put my coat over you."

"I'm a-goin' to shuck down an' be easy-like, an' if seein' white meat don't plague you gen'lemen. Marth, you take Mista Maxwell's slut there out in the cane to squat down; reckon she craves to. Then, when you comes back, you kin snuggle her up here by the bed an' both on you keep warm."

"Pull my boots, too, after you serves you masta, Jason," said Charles, resuming his stool and stretching his arms before the fire. "I don't aim to undress, neither."

Pierce had but two garments to shed, and in his lank nakedness, he appeared even taller and more cadaverous than in his clothes. "Prince," he cautioned, "you keep that fire wooded up an' this room right hot, with all these nekid young of yourn scattered aroun'."

Charles rose and went out-of-doors. When he returned, the moon had risen and the fields were silver. Pierce was in bed against the wall, and Charles crawled into the middle position Hammond lay down only after Ellen had returned and he had bedded her safely on the floor at his side with Martha's black arms around her and covered with her master's coat.

Pierce and Charles were soon asleep. It was not the uncleanness of the bed that deterred Hammond from slumber but the thinness of the mattress, and the flicker of firelight kept him awake.

Hammond watched the fire and by his resolution to sleep kept himself awake. Twice, once between his shoulders on his back and once on his side, he felt a twinge, a pinprick twinge. He sensed the bite of an insect, but was too tired, too comfortable, to rouse himself, strip off his clothes and look for the marauder. He had no timepiece and did not know the hour; at length in his restlessness, he got out of bed, made his way amidst the sleeping slaves to the door, and went outside to relieve himself. The fields were aglaze with moonlight. He returned to his bed, scratched his back, looked down at Ellen in Martha's arms, forced Charles to move over, lay down and fell quickly asleep.

When he awoke, the door was open and sunshine flooded the landscape.

Charles lay on his back, mouth fallen open, snoring. Pierce was turned to the wall. Jason was sitting up, his back braced against the side of the fireplace, and Ellen was awake but still lay patiently beside sleeping Martha. Prince moved quietly about with one of his small children pattering behind him. The other slaves, including the Mandingo, supine, arms extended full length above his head, were still fast asleep. Shote's fat legs were folded like a bullfrog's, and his vast, black backside was extended as he slept on his belly.

Hammond had overslept his intentions, and was uncertain as to whether he should waken his host. Even with the sun well up and shining, he was not disposed to rise. He forced himself to the side of the bed, beckoned to Jason, put his fingers to his lips in a signal for silence, and pointed to his boots, which Jason, kneeling, forced onto his master's feet. Hammond walked to where Mede lay, and at the faintest jog from the master's boot, the Mandingo rose upright and rubbed his eyes.

"Git up. Git up," the owner commanded *sotto voce*, "We got to eat and start a-goin'."

Mede sprang to his feet, scratching his thighs, his calf, his back and his belly.

"Whut a-matterin' you, Mede? Whut fer you scratch that a-way?"

"I'm bit, Master, I'm bit," replied the Negro, restraining himself momentarily.

"Let see whut it is," said Ham, jerking a button from Mede's shirt in his anxiety to open it. He spat on his finger and rubbed the flea-bite solicitously. "Ain't only fleas or somethin', ain't bugs or lice, but jest as I wanted to show you to Papa, jest as I wanted to show you clean, without a pimple."

Prince kicked Belle awake, and she arose and set about preparing breakfast, which added up, when it was ready, to cold pone, milk and coffee.

Ellen was easily roused, but Charles was hard to wake. Jason stumbled over Shote, who was surly about being disturbed, but who with some difficulty extracted himself from his frog-like posture, got his knees under him, and climbed languidly to his unsteady feet. Once he was upright, Prince sent him to care for the horses.

All was crowded confusion while the pone was distributed and gourds of milk were handed about. While his guests ate, Pierce dragged his bones from the bed and stood before the fire rubbing and scratching and caressing himself before he should put on his garments.

"You flea-bit, too?" Hammond asked him.

"Naw, jest a-scratchin' to git myself started. Fleas don't eat offn me, my niggers neither, jest strangers. Git some?"

"Jest three or four bites, but my niggers near ruint, plagued to show 'em to my papa."

"They washed. Fleas don' never bother dirty niggers. Hadn't ought to never wash 'em," Pierce stepped into his pants, and swung his shirt over his shoulders. "They heal quick, howsumever; won't be more than jest a tiny spot-

like by time you carry 'em home."

"How much you a-goin' to charge me? Whut's the damages?" Hammond reached into his pocket.

"Goin' a'ready? Reckoned you'd set a day or two—till noonin' anyways. Gits lonesome-like here all alone, and jest the niggers to talk, an' they don't know nothin'."

"I crave to git home an' git some work done. How much?"

"Let me see now. There was supper las' night, an' beds all around, an' breakfast this mornin' and the hosses an' all. Wouldn't have cost you nothin', not a cent, an' if you would of let that big buck of yourn to my old slut. As is, how much do you say? Whutever's right."

The burden of naming a price was upon the guest, which forced him to a generosity beyond fair compensation. He produced a five dollar piece, which was lavish.

Pierce took the money and turned it, bit it, and turned it over in his hand in feigned dissatisfaction. It was in fact double his expectations. "Reckon it's enough, anyways, to pay the vetinary fer cuttin' them saplin's."

Shote ambled from the stable leading the horses, gingerly keeping Charles' horse between himself and Eclipse. Hammond noted that the gelding hardly limped at all and he stepped behind the horse to run his fingers over the wound which he found scabbed and free from pus. Charles took his bridle and vaulted into the saddle with no concern for his mount.

"Put up Jason behin' me," he ordered Mede.

"No, Mede kin tote the boy," said Hammond. "One enough fer that hoss." He mounted Eclipse and Mede lifted Ellen to her place behind him. Instead of stooping to let Jason climb to his shoulders, the Mandingo effortlessly grasped the boy by the thighs, raised him, ducked his head between Jason's legs and seated him firmly on his shoulders. Jason, unafraid of falling, laughed, and Hammond admired Mede's agility and strength. A pretty property, a wise purchase. His father would approve.

The whole Pierce menage was out to wave the guests farewell. Shote was in the forefront, waved the longest and called the loudest, his expenditure of a day's energy. As the horses turned from the lane into the road, Hammond shifted in his saddle and looked at the cabin with a silent shaking of his head.

Eclipse broke into an unurged canter, Mede into a trot, and Charles' horse crow-hopped to keep up with the sounder steeds. His limp grew worse and Hammond pulled his horse back to an amble. They had not gone a dozen miles when Hammond recognized landmarks and knew they were nearing home. There, ahead, was High Tower, the abandoned plantation of old Ezra Hightower, now dead. Hammond wondered that the heirs had not claimed it and had let it fall into such dilapidation. He wondered even more that the occupants of the rickety cabin across the road had not moved into the large and sounder house. Even the slave cabins of High Tower were more habitable

than the occupied house. More and more familiar to Hammond grew the countryside.

"If I'd a knowed how clost we was, we had a rid on last night an' a saved them niggers from all them bites," he remarked to Charles. "Papa won't like them marked up niggers, I'm a-fearin'. See them welts through they clothes afore they shucks."

"Ain't nothin'. I got some, my own self."

"Papa like his niggers clean. All our niggers free from blemish, near as we kin keep 'em."

Hammond's heart beat faster. He had been away less than a week, but homing aroused in him emotions which he did not understand. Here he belonged. From this soil he had been fashioned and he acknowledged his kinship with it. They reached the road that turned from the main highway toward the Widow Johnson's place, now probably Redfield's. The way was straight ahead; Charles on his slower horse would be unable to lose his way. Hammond loosed his reins and Eclipse, who knew as surely as his rider that he was nearing the end of his journey, broke first into a canter and then into a gallop. Ellen clung firmly to Hammond's body. Mede was unable to keep up with Eclipse, but lost ground gradually, and Charles made no effort to press his mount.

Before he reached the lane, Eclipse began to neigh at intervals and as he turned toward the house he nickered again and received a nicker in reply from the stables. Half down the lane Old Beller, the hound, came bounding and barking his greeting, not so much for Hammond as for Eclipse. Hammond had reached the house before the Mandingo had turned into the lane.

Three or four Negroes had appeared from behind the house to vie silently for the honor of taking charge of the horse, which Hammond, after Ellen had slid to the ground and he had dismounted, turned over to Napoleon.

"How you all are? How's everybody? Whure your masta?"

"We's well, thank'ee, suh, Masta. Right glad you back."

"Why? Anythin' wrong?"

"No, suh, we all jest glad. That all."

Meg was on the gallery, bouncing up and down in ecstacy, his face one broad smile. Unable to speak, he could only gurgle. Lucretia Borgia stormed out the door and gathered Hammond to her broad bosom.

"Whure Papa? Whure Papa?" Hammond demanded.

"He comin'," answered Lucretia Borgia.

And he came half leaning on Mem's arm. The son kissed him, patted his shoulder, asked about his health.

"I right well; I better, sure better. Ol' rheumatiz most dreened away," he assured Hammond. "That Alph gittin' it good, dreenin' right into him but I'm a-doctorin' him pourin' toddy into him."

"I stirred 'em, Masta, I stirred 'em, an' toted 'em, jest like how you say, Masta, suh. I took keer of 'em jest like you tol' me. I your nigger, Masta.

Ain't I your nigger?" Meg pleaded for recognition.

"Sure is," with a clap on the shoulder, was all that Hammond had time to answer him.

"Whut this?" demanded the old man, turning to Ellen. "Look like a wench, tits an' all. Whut fer she wear pants?" and he felt to determine her sex.

Before Hammond had time to answer him, the Mandingo, Jason atop his shoulders, loped down the lane. "A Mandingo, a young Mandingo! Whure you git him? Ol' Mista Wilson? A purty Mandingo! Jest whut I been a-cravin'."

"My fightin' nigger," Hammond explained.

"Whut that wench around his neck? Whut you want with her? Ain't got no shape."

"Not a wench. A buck. Mista Wilson sent him to you—a present."

"Whut this? A buck in a dress, a wench in britches. It ain't decent. Whut Mista Wilson reckon I wants with a wench-buck like that? Is it a cod? I reckon I got to keep it—a present you say? Can't ever sell no present. Git down! Put down an' let me see!"

"Charles is comin'," Hammond declared. "His hoss is lame. Man shoot him."

"Shot him? Shot who? Who Charles?"

"Charles Woodford, Cousin Charles, Cousin Blanche's brother. Man shot his hoss."

"Cousin Blanche? Oh, yes. You sparkin' her? She purty? Whut Major Woodford say?" Maxwell piled question upon question.

"Cousin Blanche an' me goin' to marry. That is, and you loan some money to Major Woodford." Ham qualified his assertion. "I promise him twenty-five hunderd dollar."

"You ain't never goin' to git it back. You know that. That ol' leech, sellin' his own white daughter, an' her a Hammond."

"Shu-shu," Ham silenced his father. "Here come Charles."

"We talk about it after."

Charles, when he had turned into the lane, had tried to put his horse to a gallop, which had turned into only a rapid hop. The flourish of arrival he had planned failed to come off, but his welcome was none the less warm. Vulcan grabbed his horse and started to lead it away.

"Hold on, leave me see that laig. Wait," ordered the old man before he turned to his guest and grasped his hand. "Well, I declare, Major Woodford's boy, I declare. Come in, come in. A Hammond, too, every foot a Hammond, 'ceptin', of course, the eyes."

"My eyes—my eyes ain't straight," Charles shrugged apologetically.

"That ain't nuthin'," said Maxwell. "Worse than the eyes, you skinny—growed too rapid, I warrant, an' fornicated too much, knowin' the Major. Not enough corn whiskey, knowin' Cousin Beatrix."

"Mamma temp'ance," explained the boy.

"We fix that at Falconhurst. Lucretia Borgia's side meat an' plenty of good corn, we send you home lookin' like they won't know you. Go in, go in the house. I want to look at this hoss's laig."

"Man shot at us, an' hit the hoss yestiday," Hammond explained. "Near string halted him."

"Shore did, jest missed that leader. Went right through clean, though; no fester. Be all right, an' he not used fer few days. Turn him out, pasture him day times. Hear, Vulc; bait him good an' turn him out."

As the three white men entered the sitting room, Meg rushed pell mell from the dining room with three steaming toddies on his tray. "This one yourn, Masta, suh; this one biggest," he said pausing before Hammond and lifting a glass from the tray.

Hammond accepted the drink but cautioned the boy, "Any biggest is fer yo' masta. Always wait on him first, not me."

"You my masta, Masta, suh. I your nigger, please, Masta."

"I knows you mine, but your ol' masta come first. You my nigger, all right. I wants you should wash me right after dinner. Reckon you ain't fergot how."

In the excitement, the headlong rush, the sting of the rebuke, the anticipated pleasure of intimate contact with his master's flesh, Meg stubbed his toe on a chair rocker and pitched forward to his knees, dropping his tray, spilling both hot toddies over Alph, in a stupor on the floor, and breaking one of the goblets. He burst into tears of mortification and frustration and was unable to rise.

Hammond sprang to his feet in anxiety and picked the young Negro up. "You hurt? Whure you hurt?" he demanded. "Ain't nothin' but spilled corn. Don' fret you," he comforted the slave. "That whut come from runnin'. Learn how to move slow, proud like, an' you craves to be a house nigger. Now pick up that waiter an' see kin you fetch more toddies, an' steady-like."

Meg brushed the tears from his eyes, grasped and held his stubbed toe, and asked Maxwell, "Mus' I stir another 'n fer Alph? He 'bout drunk a'ready."

"Nev' mind, never min'. Stir him one."

"You tol' me never give corn to no nigger," protested Hammond. "Ain't good fer niggers."

"This medicine-like fer this buck fer his rheumatiz. Don' want he should be cripped up. Ben feedin' him toddies ever sence you been gone away. Ain't good fer much nohow, that is, 'cept dreenin'. Ain't peart like your buck."

"Drunk, don't have no chanst. How Mem actin' sence I touched him up?"

"It spried Mem up some. Right good, on'y your Meg won't let him do nothin'. Beats all how that saplin' do ever'thin' without no tellin'. Take care of me like I a babe in arms. Do ever'thin' fer me ceptin' to cob my ass fer me."

"Mayhap, you wants him fer yourn. I don't crave him especial. He cun-

nin' an' all, but you kin have him," Hammond gestured with a mild hope that his offer would be refused.

"No, no, he your nigger he claim, an' I reckon he be. This triflin' one is mine," said Maxwell nodding toward Alph. "That Meg don' even like me. Does fer me because you tell him. Talk about you all time."

"Don't make no difference who he like. A little skin offn his ass an' he like you as well as me."

"No, no; he yourn. Let him be yourn."

"Cousin Charles here crave to have Jason fer his body nigger. Jason yourn. I tell Charles I ast you."

"That wench buck Mista Wilson send? It's name of Jason? Reckon Charles kin have it. No good fer nothin' else. Started a wench, I reckon, an' changed its mind afore its mammy got shet of it. Don' know whut ol' Mista Wilson expect, or whut he mean."

"I kin break him good to the house, an' you lettin' me have him," said Charles. "He smooth and purty, kind of."

"Purty, an' if he had tits," sneered Maxwell. "No bettern a capon."

"No whuppin' him, Charles," cautioned Hammond. "Un'erstan'? That is, 'lessen I say, or Papa say. Coursen, you wants to box his jaws or spank his bottom, usin' your han', cain't he'p that, but no whuppin' like you done that wench of yourn at Crowfoot."

Meg had returned with his toddies, treading slowly and surely, and passed them to Maxwell and to Charles, after which he substituted on the table by Hammond's side the fresh hot drink and transferred Hammond's depleted glass to Alph, who gulped it greedily. Meg looked to Hammond for approval of the poise with which he served and received a nod which produced in its turn a self-conscious smirk. The servant was cured of his precipitance. Unasked, he fell at Hammond's feet, removed his boots, loosened his socks, and shoved carpet slippers on his feet.

When Mem appeared with the dinner bell, Meg sprang to the door of the dining room and held it open. He was there to withdraw Hammond's chair, to open his napkin, to serve his food, to wave the peacock brush. He was everywhere and did everything, a miniscule Crighton, fixated upon devotion to his master alone. Whatever he did for another, it was solely to please Hammond. He would have cut the throat of the elder Maxwell with as ready a will as he brought him a toddy, if he had envisioned Hammond's approbation of such an act.

Meg was, in fact, his mother's son. He dominated through his humility. The status to which he aspired was Hammond's esteem alone.

"I wonder did Lucretia Borgia feed them new niggers?" Maxwell bethought himself aloud. "Memnon, sen' Lucretia Borgia in here."

Meg was in the kitchen and back again, pushing his mother before him before Mem could finish pouring the coffee, set down the pot and reach the door.

"Here Mammy is. Here Lucretia Borgia," announced the boy as if the woman's huge bulk failed to dominate the room by its presence.

"Did you feed them niggers Masta Hammon' brung?" Maxwell demanded.

"They's et," she answered, " 'ceptin' I didn't give that big 'un all he crave. Ain't got no bottom. Cain't fill him."

"Give 'em all white vittles, all they kin eat. The big one, too. They's special. All you kin shovel in 'em. Hear?" Hammond demanded confirmation from the cook.

"I's listenin'."

"An' that Mandingo, make him swaller half a dozen raw eggs—eight or ten; stir 'em up an' make him drink 'em down after he done et hisself full," Maxwell further instructed.

"The Man—, which one that?"

"The big one, the puce one. Make him take it."

"I pour 'em eggs down or I choke him silly," Lucretia Borgia promised. "Whure them niggers come from? Whyn't they cain't talk good? Cain't know whut they sayin'."

"They learn. They learn," said Maxwell. "Treat 'em good. That Mandingo is fer Lucy an' Big Pearl. He goin' to be Masta Ham's fighter."

"Um! Um!" Lucretia Borgia expressed her approval. "I bin a-lookin' at him, myself. He sure a elegant buck."

"You don' need him now. Maybe next time."

"Um! Um!"

Meg was back at the table, forcing food upon his master.

"Dinner bye," observed Maxwell, "an' I'll have to bring them niggers in an look at 'em."

"Bring 'em in, the black 'un?" asked Hammond.

"Didn't Ol' Mista Wilson bring 'em in? Falconhurst ain't no better'n Coign."

"They flea bit—some. Got fleas las' night, that cabin. Better let 'em heal, and let me wash 'em afore you shuck 'em. Besides, they all petered out."

"Somethin' wrong with them? You don' want I should see 'em?" Maxwell bridled. "Reckon I cain't see a nigger's bones through his meat after all these years? Its bones as counts. You kin put meat on 'em or take it off, but you cain't change their bones. Don't have to finger a nigger."

"But Ellen, Papa. She purty. I don' want you should see her dirty and tired an' flea bit."

"An' she purty to you, son, she purty. It's you as is goin' to pleasure her. All I wants to see is her bones, know how she hang together."

"She hang together good. You'll see."

"That Jason do, also," said Charles.

"That Mandingo is my kind of a nigger. You done good to git him, Ham. Have to begin learnin' him fightin' right away. See whether he got any heart, got any bottom."

"Got to let him rest some first. He tired, totin' that Jason all the way."

"Well, call 'em in," said Maxwell, pushing back his chair from the table. "I'll have a toddy an' look 'em over. Four of 'em, Meg. One fer your brother."

The new Negroes, except for their being fed, had been ignored, waiting in the dooryard. Mede lay asleep on his hands, half in the shade of the tupelo tree. Hammond went himself to summon the three, limped across the yard to waken the Mandingo, rocking him back and forth with his foot. "Better shuck down out here," he told them. "Don't want your dirty clo's in the house. New ones, anyways, after you-all washed."

Hammond led the way to the sitting room where his father and his cousin nursed their toddies, waiting for them to cool. Maxwell's primary interest was the Mandingo, and he called him up first, leaving Ellen and Jason against the wall, embarrassed not by their nudity but by their efforts to orient themselves to their new home. Mede was restless with the tension of his examination, shifting rapidly from foot to foot, flailing his arms, tensing and relaxing his muscles, in his anxiety to display his symmetry and strength, of which he was amply aware. There was no evidence of his fatigue.

"I'm right plagued to show off these flea-spotted niggers like this. Craves you should see 'em rested an' well," Hammond made excuses. He was proud of his purchases, avid for his father's approval.

"You not showin' 'em off, Ham; you jest showin' 'em. I'm your papa, recollect; I not cravin' to buy your niggers. Them bites will git well." None the less, Maxwell pulled Mede toward him and rubbed a flea-bite above the boy's navel with the heel of his palm as if to erase it, dipped his finger in his toddy and applied it to the spot as if to wash it away. "Keep still an' stop that stompin'," he ordered. "You ain't no stud horse. Now squat," and he inserted his finger into the boy's mouth and felt of the teeth, after which, using both hands, he pulled the lips apart to note the occlusion.

"Reckon he be a right good fighter. Eh, Cousin Warren?" commented Charles.

Maxwell took a sip of toddy, smacked his lips as a preliminary to his opinion. "Twenty-seven hunderd, you tell me? Whut the matter with that ol' man? That nigger, a Mandingo, is worth thirty-five hunderd, mayhap four thousand any day in the New Orleans market. Never see a better buck."

Hammond sighed with relief. He knew the worth of his purchase, but feared his father's verdict.

"Pure Mandingo? You sure?" demanded Maxwell. "Don't want no half."

"I tell you he Big Pearl's brother, by ol' Xerxes out'n Lucy."

Maxwell nodded. "Well, call Big Pearl. Might as well try 'em together, let 'em take up, an' git it over."

"Papa, that buck petered out. He no good today."

"I not tired," protested the Mandingo. "I am ready."

"I say you tired, you tired. Don't dispute," Hammond silenced Mede. "Besides, Papa," he went on, "I forgotten to tell you, mayhap he cain't breed."

"Cain't? Whyn't cain't he? Whut fer did you git him, then?"

"Ol' Mista Wilson say he hung so big, he tear the wenches. He say we send him back an' we cain't use him, but I wants to keep him anyways fer a fighter."

The idea inspired a chuckle from the older man. "Big Pearl? Too big fer Big Pearl?" he scoffed. "A little bacon rind. Didn't Ol' Wilson never hear about bacon rind? He ain't needed none, I reckon, these forty year, if ever he did." He dismissed the Mandingo, and Hammond instructed the boy to get soap from Lucretia Borgia and go to the river to bathe.

Ellen and Jason came forward together, but Maxwell's survey of them appeared superficial and without enthusiasm. "Right smooth and right purty," he appraised the girl. "Plenty behind at her age. Calves ain't stringy neither. Good milker, too, will be. Git good wench suckers out'n one like that; no good to breed bucks though—too thin skinned an' fine drawn, an' too much white. To bring good bucks, use a yaller wench ever' time, not less than quadroon. This is an octoroon, no less, mayhap, whiter yet. How much, you say?"

"Fifteen hunderd dollars. Don't care had she been five thousan', she mine an' I wants her."

"Whut you arguin' about, Son? You got her, ain't you? She's a fancy, all right. No denyin'. Easy worth the money—especially was she a virgin time you bought her."

"She still a virgin," Ham confessed, blushing.

"Whure you bin? Thought you got her fer your own self. Ain't no money in payin' fifteen hunderd fer a wench to sell agin. Too risky, might die or git raped takin' 'em to market."

"I got her fer my own self an' I goin' to keep her fer my own self—always. I tender of her. I guess, I guess I kind of loves her—as folks calls it. On'y wench I wants; on'y wench I ever will want; ain't you Ellen?"

A blush suffused the girl's face and spread to her breasts. She smiled at her master. Indifferent as she had shown herself to the examination she had undergone, to the estimate of her value, to the discussion of her virginity, her master's mention of love touched modesty and stirred her blood.

"How your wife, how Cousin Blanche goin' to like that?" asked the father. "Course, she 'spects you pester around, but she not like you lovin' one."

"Make no diff'ance whut Blanche like. She cry an' pout, anything you do. She hypoed. She pizen, I tellin' you; Blanche pizen." Charles' denunciation was as emphatic as it was vague.

"I cain't help. I never seen Ellen until after I'd asted Blanche," Hammond confessed. "Besides, Ellen a nigger. No white lady goin' to care about no nigger."

"Mayhap not," Maxwell admitted with reservation. He turned to Jason and shook his head. "Ol' Man Wilson jest gittin' shet of this one. Know it ain't worth nothin'. Know I cain't sell a present."

"Mista Wilson gittin' ol'. Fixin' to die. Right choice of this young

buck. Craves you should take keer on him."

"Whut the matter with Jason?" Charles wanted to know. "Whut wrong with him?"

"Yes, whyn't you like him?" seconded Hammond. "He sound."

"Why, he slick an' thin skinned as that wench. Half one thing an' half t'other; that whut wrong. Fac' is, more wench than buck, savin' between his legs, an' that ain't much. He don't need no bacon rind."

"I couldn't refuse a present," Hammond accepted the censure.

"You could a run him home. Come in ridin' the Mandingo's neck, tirin' him out, an' wearin' a skirt besides. Suits him. Better keep him in one."

Jason winced and hung his head at the old man's contemptuous words.

"I likes him. A good nigger," Charles maintained.

"Keep it way from me, an' you kin have it. Reckon you kin use it as a bed wench, too," the owner sneered.

Charles paled at the remark but ignored the implication. Jason, feeling himself disposed of, retired to beside Charles' chair and squatted by it, and Charles ran his hand through the boy's hair.

Meg had loitered in the background during the latter part of this colloquy, as if he had something to say. At length Hammond turned to him.

"Please, suh, Masta, suh," he announced. "Tub ready when you like it."

"But I wants a fire. Too cold to wash withoutn."

"Fire struck. Water hot. Clothes laid out. An' nigger waitin'," Meg enumerated.

"Nigger kin wait," said Hammond. "Meg, an' you don' quit your bullin' me aroun', I'm goin' to peel you, goin' peel you. That's whut."

"Yas, suh, Masta, suh," Meg acknowledged the threat, grinning. He knew that chastisement was not the reward of service at Falconhurst. "Wants I should fetch you the paddle an' that rubbin' in stuff?"

"No, you crazy buck, you. No. Come along, Ellen. I wants you should wash Ellen too after you washes me." Hammond started toward the stairs, Meg half running in front of him and the girl following after.

The young slave undressed his master in silence, added hot water to that in the round tub, and steadied Hammond skillfully as he sat down in it. He lingered in his enjoyment of his washing of the master's pink flesh with its golden hairs wilted by the water. The former bath had taught him facility. When he came to bathe the foot of the stiff leg, he made bold to stoop and press his cheek against the ankle, and received for the caress a lunge that staggered him. He accepted the rebuff, finished his chore, aided Hammond to his feet and towelled him briskly until he was completely dry.

Hammond was refreshed. His flesh tingled with the rubbing Meg had given him, and the fresh linen felt good against his skin. He surrendered to the boy to put the remainder of his clothes on him, all except his coat. He seated himself on the bed beside Ellen, who had watched his bath with silent interest. "Now, you wash her," Hammond told the boy.

Meg did not relish the chore assigned him, but his master failed to see the condescension in the glance when Meg rolled his eyes toward Ellen. He lifted the bucket from the fire and added its contents to the water in which Hammond had been bathed, then sloshed his hand into the tub to ascertain the temperature, about which, in fact, he was indifferent. He raised his arm in an impatient signal that the bath was ready.

As Ellen rose from the bed, Hammond reached out and stroked her flank fondly, which gesture caused Meg to flinch with envy of her place in Hammond's favor. Meg was torn in ambivalence between his hopeless rivalry with the girl and his duty to his master. He grasped Ellen's arm and pushed her none too gently into the tub of water, spattering the carpet. To none of the three did it seem more incongruous that the young buck should bathe his master's wench than that he should be called upon to bathe his horse or his dog. Ellen's status as her master's concubine would, an did, stifle any concupiscence that might beset Meg, whose passion was not lust but jealousy. He set about scouring the girl's body with the dish-rag gourd with an alacrity founded in a determination to get the unpleasant job over as quickly as was compatible with getting her clean, and she did not resent the roughness with which he handled her.

Meg was not unfamiliar with female nudity. The soft contours of Ellen's young body excited him no more than the gross muscles of Lucretia Borgia, the lean angularity of Lucy, or the powerful sinews of Big Pearl. He was used to watching his masters strip down their wenches for routine inspection or for display to guests or possible buyers. As he dried Ellen on the towel that he had previously used on Hammond, he cogitated the reasons for his master's preference for Ellen above himself. Why, Meg asked himself, should she be accorded the intimacy of contact with Hammond's body, the access to his bed, more than Meg, who yearned for these marks of favor? He was as young, as lithe, as clean as she, he even thought as beautiful, and he knew that he was as ardent. To lie in submissive abandon in the embrace of that pink flesh, brushed by its golden hairs—felicity, complete and absolute. Pain inflicted by this god would transmute to ecstasy. Meg had no fair concept of what he desired. He wanted contact, rapport, even identity with his master, wanted to sink into him, to become a part of him, to be absorbed by him, but to retain a separate identity with which to serve him. He had a vague sense that it was Ellen's femaleness that made this possible for her, and his maleness that forestalled it for him. He hated her while he served her, hated her femaleness, her beauty and the softness of her flesh, whatever about her might prompt his master to choose her before himself. At the same time he loved her out of his loyalty to Ham; she was his master's property, beloved by his master, as he himself would choose to be beloved. Meg was torn.

Meg's innocence was not complete. He knew hazily that the female complemented and satisfied the male; he didn't know just how. He had seen Hammond and Dite's contortions beneath the bed covers, but had little either

of awareness or curiosity as to what was occurring. He knew that some function of the male caused the swelling of female bellies from which eventually their young emerged, he knew not how. He had felt vague stirrings of his own viscera, and had indulged with Alph in mutual and secretive play on their pallet. No reticence had spared his innocence. It was presumed that mere Negro animalism would enlighten him in due time, if it had not done so already, about the phenomena of sex, of which there were few that he should ever need to know. Why waste instruction on a young buck who had eyes and ears and a body?

When Meg had finished drying Ellen, Hammond instructed him to go to Lucretia Borgia and obtain a dress for her—a new dress, none of those patched up rags such as the other wenches wore. "And then," he added, "you might as well wash yourself in that tub as is all ready, an' you wants to." Hammond remembered his former bath and the boy's asking for permission to bathe in the same water.

Meg's eyes rolled with scorn. "I don' craves to wash in her water, Masta, suh. I wants yourn."

It was not overt disobedience, merely the rejection of his master's suggestion, but it vexed the white man. He grasped Meg, clothed as he was, and plunged him into the soiled water, raised him by his feet and immersed his head. "Nev' mind the water, nor whose; when I says wash, you wash. Hear me?"

"Yas, suh, Masta," Meg answered sullenly. "I never meant—"

"Nev' mind. You a triflin' nigger, jest like your pappy. Now, go git that dress and come back here an' wash—good."

Meg departed, dripping.

Hammond's violent action had mollified him. He ran his hand over Ellen as she sat on the side of the bed, stopped to press a flea-bite on her leg, kissed the nape of her neck and stroked her breasts. "This is whure we goin' sleep—ever' night. Come up here soon's you kin after supper. I's petered from that ridin'. I'll need you early," he instructed her and went downstairs.

"Whut become of that Charles?" his father inquired as Hammond entered the room.

"Around, I reckon. Mayhap sleepin' or trainin' that buck. Glad to be shet of him an' we kin talk."

"His sister, Miz Blanche? You goin' to marry, are you? Dead set on it?"

"I reckon I am. You craves me, doesn' you? Cain't crawdaddle now, 'lessen you won't sen' that money to the Major."

"I'll sen' it, an' you wants, but it looks like buyin' her. Charles kin tote it along home with him when he go. Had ought to have knowed Woodford would scrudge money outn you someways; like him. Cain't never collec' it back."

"I knows," admitted the son.

"Miz Blanche will make a good wife. Hammond blood. She nice? And purty?"

"Blanche all right—right light haired an' fair complected an' all. Course she all covered up all the time, an' right shy-like. I hadn't seen this Ellen, then, you knows."

"Ellen only a nigger," the elder man said casually and without contempt. "She right nice an' shapely, but she ain't white. Couldn't marry her and have no son—leastwise not a white son."

"Course not. I'm goin' to marry all right. But I'm goin' to keep me Ellen, Blanche or no Blanche," Hammond affirmed, and the father nodded his acquiescence.

"Whure that nigger of yourn? Minute you comes, he go off an' not stir me no toddy."

"He upstairs washin' off. Not hot enough yet fer to wash him in Ol' Tombigbee."

"Call that Mem, an' you kin find him. His ain't as good, seems like, not as strong, like the ones your buck stirs, but call him anyways. I reckon you want a toddy; an' Alph will drink one an' we kin wake him up," whereat Maxwell kicked from his somnolence the boy at his feet.

Hammond called Mem loudly three times and at length he came with feigned alacrity.

"I'd keep that Meg away from the Tombigbee, an' I was you. This other'n right here with me all the time. Better keep yourn up," the father counseled.

"Gaters? Early fer 'em. An' no harm anyways."

"Worse. Nigger stealers. I'm not sure but seem like. Nigger stealers, after them twins."

Unconvinced, but wary, Hammond asked, "Whut makin' you think?"

"Well, mayhap not, but Willis Hall—you know that Preacher Hall they run away from Benson fer tryin' to steal niggers—"

"Never could prove nothin'," said Hammond.

"I know, I know. Well, this Hall come a-ridin' in here Satiday on a good sorrel, after you had went on Friday, wantin' to buy niggers. Thought I wouldn't know him, called hisself Mason, but it was Hall all right. Wanted to buy the twins, knows all about 'em. Let it slip out that Brownlee told him."

"Brownlee?"

"Yes, Brownlee is in it. I wouldn't even show 'em. Told him the two on 'em was down with the epizootic, notwithstandin' that this 'un was layin' right here drunk asleep at my feet and Hall a-lookin' right at him."

"Brownlee dead set on gittin' them twins, seem like."

"Got a buyer waitin' fer 'em in New Orleans, a rich Frenchie, Hall say," the older man explained. "But I don't want no truck with Brownlee, or Hall neither."

"Hall ain't too bad, I reckon," Hammond defended him.

"A nigger stealer," persisted Maxwell. "Right well set up though, an' handsome like. Talks good."

Hammand passed over the accusation. " 'Cause he wanted to buy 'em whut make you think he goin' to filch 'em?"

"After I got shet of him without shootin' him, one of the niggers, Vulcan it was, ben a-fishin', saw a white scamp a-sneakin' about down on the bank about sundown or a little after an' two more on 'em in a skift. Vulc too skeared to ast the man whut did he want, and the white man too skeared to finish his job. Got in the skift with the other two an' paddled away."

"Hall, you reckon? Or Brownlee?"

"I don' know. Vulc tol' Lucretia Borgia, an' Lucretia Borgia tell me. I had Vulc sent in an' tried to git more out'n him, but a nigger don't know nothin' an' cain't remember nothin'. I asted if it was the same man as was here that mornin', and Vulc thought it was, said it look like. But you know a nigger. Tells you whut he reckons you craves to hear."

"Probably nothin'. Some hunters or somethin'."

"Prob'ly," Maxwell agreed, "but better watch these here twins. Won't hurt nothin'."

"Hall," said Hammond. "You know who Hall is? He worked fer Ol' Mista Wilson a long time ago—overseer at Coign Plantation until religion struck him an' he felt the call to preach. Mista Wilson like him—good driver."

"Ol' Wilson likes ever'body. Wonder Hall didn't steal all the Coign niggers, 'ceptin' he hadn't started his preachin' then."

"Fac' is, Hall is Ellen's pappy, an' that Jason's," Hammond felt some temerity in saying.

"How?"

"Fact. Ol' Wilson said so."

"I swan. Mayhap he is after stealin' them. He kin have the buck, fer all I care."

"You don't like Jason? He make a good little house nigger."

"I wouldn't a laid out no money fer him."

"I didn't."

"He right whure he fittin', a-flunkyin' that cross-eye of Woodford's. But we cain't keep Cross Eye ferever jest for the nigger to have somebody to flunky. So Hall is his pappy? Reckoned they was something wrong with that buck."

"An' Ellen's pappy," added Hammond jealously.

"Don't hurt her none—not fer whut you wants her."

"I reckon, Papa, you right put out with me, spendin' so much money fer Ellen. Seems like we didn't need her none. But I wants her, Papa, I wants her." Hammond began to weep in his effort to make his father comprehend his need for the girl. He fancied a rebuke in the elder man's dismissal of his purchase as a matter not pertaining to the plantation economy and therefore outside his purview.

"There, there, Son. Don't you cry. The wench is all right, right fancy, an' right cheap at the price. Make a breeder outn her, once you gits tired of her an' 'Tense ripen up."

"Ain't a-goin' to git tired. I don' crave 'Tense or no other wench," averred Ham.

"The other'n is the one you payin' too much fer."

"The Mandingo? You said—"

"Not the Mandingo, but the other'n—the Woodford gal, Cross-Eye's sister."

"But, Papa. You want me to—"

"Marry a white lady. Sure do, but not buy her an' her whole family."

"You kin jest not send the money," Hammond suggested almost anxiously.

"We'll send the money. 'Tain't the money."

Charles entered the room and interrupted the colloquy. He threw himself in a chair, announcing, "I like it. Ain't no prayin' an' don'tin'. You an' Cousin Hammond treats me growed up. An' there ain't that Blanche a-cryin' an a-wantin' an' carryin' on."

"You be goin' home agin purty soon. Don't git to likin' Falconhurst too good," warned Maxwell.

"I ain't never goin' home. I'm a-goin' to stay."

"I reckon not," Maxwell modified the finality of his statement.

"Not till I see Cousin Ham's fightin' nigger, no way."

"Got to train him first," said Ham. "Mayhap take weeks."

Meg came in, looked guiltily askance at Ham and began collecting the empty goblets.

"You wash?" his master demanded.

"Yas, suh, Masta. I wash like you tol' me."

"Come here," said Hammond, grabbing Meg's shirt, pulling him to his side. He grasped an ear, threw the head to one side, looked into the ear and behind it. Then he raised one foot and ran his fingers between the toes. "Reckon you got clean," he dismissed the boy.

"Toddies, suh, Masta?"

"Toddies," repeated Hammond, and Meg knew that his sins were forgiven him.

"Jason won't never make no fightin' nigger," Charles hazarded, hopeful for a contradiction. "Cries when you hurt him."

"No sense in hurtin' him," said Ham.

"I means trainin' him."

"Don' train him rough, or I'll snach him away from you. I tol' you not to larrup that buck."

"Mayhap whut he needin'," said Maxwell. "Make a buck outn him."

"Charles an' me aims to go into Benson Satiday to watch the fightin', see who got fighters, an' whut kind of niggers they bettin'," Hammond told his father.

"An' carry Mede along—jest to show him," Charles added with enthusiasm.

"Mede stay home—hid," said Hammond.

"When you in Benson, better git a bottle of Dr. Mulbach's Serpent Oil to rub on that Mandingo," Maxwell suggested. "It sovereign."

"Mede, he ain't sick, don't need no medicament."

"Better git it. Stink bad, but you need it a-trainin' him. Makes him limber and flexuous, rubbed on his jints. Circus folks all use Dr. Mulbach's."

"Dr. Mulbach's Serpent Oil, you say," Ham repeated to impress the name upon his memory.

Meg returned with his toddies and approached Hammond first, extending to him the tray with a drink slightly darker in color than the others, and set apart from them. "That one," he said, pointing.

"How many times I got to tell you your old masta first?" Hammond reprimanded him.

" 'Scuse me, Masta, suh," the boy said, changing his course and offering the tray to Maxwell, who reached across the other glasses and chose the stronger drink, to Meg's dismay.

"An' tomorrow we better dig up that pot, the one under the big tree I reckon, and count out the money fer Wilson," the old man planned. "You-all kin tote it into Benson to Banker Meyer an' git him to send it. No use procrastinatin' it."

"Reckon we kin trust Meyer to send it?"

"Cain't trus' no bank or banker long. But he'll send it. Meyer honest-like, as bankers goes. Safer havin' gold buried in a pot, but how else kin we send to Wilson?" Maxwell was not without misgivings.

"An' to Major Woodford?" Ham asked.

"Kin count that out an' keep it aside. Don't need no banker to send that. Charles here will be goin' first thing, an' he kin tote it. Cain't you, Charles?"

"Charmed to oblige you." Charles assumed formality.

"Oblige me? Oblige your papa." There was a hint of a sneer in Maxwell's voice.

"I aim to start workin' Mede in the mornin', trainin' him. Start gradual an' work up," Ham noted his father's animosity and introduced a new subject.

"Ought to pester them wenches. They wastin' time. Ought to git suckers out'n them both, come fall," said the father.

"I don't want to dreen the strength out'n the Mandingo breedin' him," objected Hammond.

"Won't weaken him none. Good as ever in an hour or two. Good fer him. Bought him fer that, didn't you?"

"Fightin' and that, yes."

"Fightin' ain't everything. It surer breedin' niggers than fightin' fer 'em. Leastwise, we doesn't lose 'em that way."

"You kin take care of that on Satiday while me an' Charles in Benson. But be careful of them wenches. Better take Ol' Lucy first. That Mede awful big."

CHAPTER 16

A LIGHT rain was falling the following day, but none the less, Hammond initiated Mede's conditioning. He set him to moving some cords of wood from one side of the house to the opposite side, not that it made any difference where the wood was stacked, but for the purpose of bringing into play the Mandingo's muscles. The Negro attacked his task briskly, and despite the weight and cumbersomeness of the lengths of wood handled them easily, more easily, in fact, than it pleased Hammond to observe. His muscles were already hard and his strength prodigious.

Except for the satisfaction of Hammond's belief that Mede must be developed, his body required no tempering. All he had was strength, however; he would have to learn to use it against an antagonist. Hammond realized that the task was no strain upon the buck's capacity, but watched with pride the alternate tensing and relaxation of the flesh through Mede's clothes, and called his father to watch with him.

"'Tain't nothin', whut he's doin'," scoffed the elder. "You plowin' next week an' short of mules. Hitch this buck to a plow an' use him 'stead of a mule. That will firm his meat."

"Reckon it would, on'y I don't want no nigger crackin' no whup over that boy," replied Ham.

"Put Big Pearl behind him, guidin' an' don' give her no snake."

Charles emerged from the house, looked awhile at Mede, and opined, "That nigger don't need no toughenin'. He kin fight right now. Let's carry him with us tomorrer."

Hammond looked at Charles in scorn and gave him no answer.

Pole and another slave, named Pompey, were delving casually and unhurriedly at the base of a large hickory tree for the pot of gold. Ham gave a glance at their work from time to time, called to them to hasten and ended his admonition with a futile threat.

"I knows I sunk it. Must be comin' to it purty quick now. Mayhap 'bout a foot or foot an' a half this way from whure they diggin'. They too close to that ol' hickory," Maxwell calculated.

"This it, Masta, suh?" asked Pole, as from his position at the bottom of the hole he handed up to Pompey a covered iron kettle encrusted with soil. "It right hefty, suh. Cain't hardly heft it."

"That it," said Hammond. "Brush off that dirt an' tote it in the house. Leave that hole open to put it back."

Halfway to the house with the heavy object, Pole's hands slipped on the slime and he dropped the pot. It landed almost upright but its lid fell off, splashing the water that had seeped into it and scattering half a dozen yellow coins. The accident earned Pole an oath and kick from Hammond, but no harm was done. The coins were recovered and the pot was tilted to drain off the remaining water, after which Mede encircled it with his arms and carried

it handily into the sitting room and placed it, as Ham directed him, in the center of the floor.

Lucretia Borgia had little concept of the value of money, and Meg none at all, but they came into the room to watch the ceremony of counting it. Maxwell sat in his chair and watched Hammond ease himself to the floor, one leg under him, the stiff one extended. He scooped the coins in his hands and let them trickle through his fingers back into the pot. Charles sat in a low chair apart and stared in wonder at the falling money, his imagination racing.

Hammond began to count and stack the money. Five double eagles he stacked against another five, and those then against another ten, until he arrived at the sum he wanted. The coins were all of twenty dollars. There was no way to make up exactly the twenty-seven hundred and fifty dollars, and so he added ten to the sum, shoved the pile aside, toppling the stacks.

"There you are, Mede. That's you. That how much you cost," Hammond explained. "Reckon you worth it?"

The Mandingo replied with the anticipated embarrassed laugh. "No, suh, Masta, suh," he said. "Not that much." He had no idea how much it might be.

Ham stacked three piles of five hundred dollars each and pushed them aside. "That's Ellen," he said.

"Whure am me, Masta, suh?" asked Meg, stooping to gaze into the pot.

"You? You ain't nowhures. Ain't worth nothin'," Hammond replied with mock seriousness. "Folks don't buy niggers like you. They breeds 'em."

He reached again into the pot, scooping out coins which he added to the uncounted pile upon the floor. From the pile he drew five stacks of twenty-five coins each and set them aside. "That," he said, looking toward his father for approval, "is fer Major Woodford."

"That is Blanche," said the father dryly.

"Pizen," added Charles.

Hammond returned the uncounted coins to the pot and put on the lid.

"Kittle gittin' lighter," remarked Maxwell, shaking his head. "Was about nineteen thousand, an' I recollect aright, in this kittle. This brings it down to," he hesitated, counting on his fingers, "to somers around twelve. We'll fill it up to a full twenty-five thousand with a little extrie fer good measure and bury it fer good next fall when you blocks that coffle in New Orleans—jest like them other three kittles we got buried around."

"About empty one of 'em, ifn we builds a house liken you lays off to," said Hammond.

"Buildin's up. Wisht I'd a done it well back—when your Mamma was livin'; cheaper then." Maxwell had a faraway look, but returned immediately to reality. "We ain't floundered yet, howsumever; we'll scrimp along. Put that kittle back agin, Son, an' make them niggers stomp the dirt in good and level the groun'." He picked up one of the stacks of coins from the pile allotted to Woodford, ran it through his fingers from one hand to the other, but did not count it.

CHAPTER 17

"NO, suh, we haven't got no diamond rings," explained the small, long-faced, bald man, removing the jeweler's glass from his eye. "Benson folks won't buy 'em. Cost too much, real diamonds do."

Hammond looked baffled.

"I tell you. I can order a ring out for you—from Orleans. Have it in about a week, Mista Maxwell."

"Well?" Ham questioned.

"How big a one do you want?" the little man leaned on the rough counter.

"I don't know. Big enough fer a white lady's finger." He placed his thumb against his little finger. "That big, I reckon."

The jeweler shook his head. "That pretty big—three or four carats—cost you money."

"How much?"

"Cain't say for certain, but three hundred dollars, about, I expect—a nice yellow stone without too much carbon."

Hammond was taken aback at the price. "Well, mayhap a littler one would do—about two hunderd worth." This was double the expenditure he had calculated upon. "But I wants a solid di'mon'."

"Of course, a real diamond." The jeweler was only a little better informed than the customer about the price and value of gems. "I suppose, rose cut?"

"Whut's that?" Ham asked, and then in the fear of displaying his ignorance: "Oh, yes, rose cut." It sounded good.

"Then, I'll order it, Mista Maxwell, subject, of course, to your acceptance after you see it. About two hundred?"

"A little more or a little less. I reckon you'd better," Hammond sighed. " 'Bout a week, you says. That next Satiday."

"Ought to come by then, unless Orleans has to git it from New York."

"All right, Mista Foreman; you git it. I'll be in."

The small bell on the door tinkled as Hammond and Charles left the watchmaker's shop with its two small show cases of tarnished gewgaws.

"Right costive," said Ham, bracing his shonlders.

"Ain't worth it," said Charles. "Fer her, it ain't."

They had already seen Meyer and given him the money to transmit to Wilson.

"That settled, an' we kin go to the tavern," said Ham. "I feels like some corn won't hurt me none now, an' the gen'lemen had ought to be comin' in with their fightin' bucks by this time."

Tender blades of unhealthy grass arose here and there through the cracks of the narrow wooden sidewalk that bordered one side of the street. Between two weed-grown lots stood a lop-sided frame building with a false front intended to simulate a second story. The windows were so grimy that one

could not see through them, and the recessed entrance was covered with dust. Hammond stopped and turned the knob but the door didn't open.

A gangling man whom Hammond failed to recognize ambled across the street. "Lookin' fer Redfield?" he inquired. "He don't come around much sence he got married. Married that widder woman an' all them niggers. Don't have to doctor no more. Wan' som'pin'?"

"Nothin' much," Ham answered. "Much oblige."

"Redfield might be at the tavern later on," volunteered the stranger. "Usual comes in fer the fightin', Satidays."

A loafer, who sat in a shady chair beneath the wooden awning of the tavern, arose and followed Hammond and Charles as they entered the long room. The bartender, who sat outside the bar talking to Sam Holden, a hanger on of the establishment, arose and retreated behind the bar at the approach of men with money to buy drinks. Holden, known to Hammond by name, and the other loafer approached the bar diffidently and leaned upon it in anticipation of an invitation, which Hammond accorded them.

The bartender's name was Pearl, Pearl Remmick, about which he knew nothing to do except to neutralize its effeminacy by a jovial aggressiveness of manner and a vehemence of language. He was a big man with heavy, red jowls, big, blunt hands, closely cropped hair, and a booming voice.

"Whut will it be, gen'lemen?" he asked.

"Corn," said Hammond and Charles in unison, and the other two men nodded.

Pearl sniffed twice and called, "Daisy, Daisy, you damn sow, come in here."

A low, fat Negress with a waddling shuffle emerged from the back room and asked, "You call me, Masta?"

"You triflin,' damn, lousy, striped-assed baboon, I tol' you to clean that damn puke off'n that fuggin' flo'. It still stink an' all them fine gen'lemen a-comin'. An' you don' git some soap an' water an' git down on your fuggin' hunkers an scour that damn floor, right up in the corners agin' that base—"

"I done so yestidy, Masta Pearl, suh."

"Do it agin, damn you. It still stink."

"I will, suh, I will. I's a-goin' to," said Daisy.

"An' you don't scour it clean this time, I goin' to tear you down. Hear? Tear you down, god damn, tear you right down, an lace you, lace the god damn fat meat off'n yo' lazy, fuggin' bones. Go to learn you to sleep on your fuggin' tits, ass up, fer a month or two. Go to show all these white gen'lemen how to tickle the damn black hide off'n yo' side-meat with a damn snake."

"You always sayin'; Masta," Daisy grunted, unterrified.

Hammond was mildly horrified at the tirade, but the wench was Remmick's to do with as he saw fit. Daisy's sloth did not seem to Ham to justify the impending chastisement, but perhaps, like Mem's, it was a culmination of a

long sequence of shirkings and omissions which merited punishment. He was resolved not to witness it, however.

Charles, on the other hand, was rapt at the prospect of a spectacle. The vividness of Pearl's stentorian words fired his imagination; and the restraint of the euphemisms heightened the implications of the threat. "Goin' to close the door an' do it right in here?" he asked anxiously. "Or out back?"

"I reckon I ain't goin' to do it at all," Pearl chuckled in answer. "Never have. Never have laid a fuggin' finger on her sence I got her, never a finger, exceptin' to cuff her around some fer stealin' corn an' drinkin' it up. Got to keep a slut threatened good though to git any work outn 'em. Reckon had ought to, but I ain't a-goin'."

"Thought you was. Sounded like," said Charles, disappointed.

"Pearl don' mean nothin' by his talk," Holden laughed. "Cain't pay no 'tention to him. Ought to hear him god-damn when he real riled. That ain't nothin'. Don' do nothin' though. Right soft hearted."

Daisy had returned with a wooden bucket full of water, and was on her knees, slopping the water over the floor. The acrid smell grew worse rather than diminished.

"Like to sell the slut though, or swap her fer a fuggin' buck, jest a saplin'. Know anybody, anybody wants to swap?" asked Pearl.

"Redfield might," Holden hazarded.

"Not you, Mista Maxwell?" Pearl suggested. "I knows you all got all fine niggers. I wants jest a common one; but might pay boot—jest a little."

"Reckon not," Hammond declined the proposal, looking down at Daisy.

"Thought, mayhap, her bein' a female—," explained Pearl. "Course, she too fat. Starve her down some, an' she still good fer breedin'. Ain't more than 'bout thirty; looks more. Three, four, five more suckers in her, anybody to take 'em out."

Hammond failed to be interested.

"Cain't lean her down, with all the god damn scrapin's from the dishes in a god damn tavern an' all the corn she steal. Don't want no fuggin' suckers around, nohow. Wisht you knew somebody with a peart young buck fer her. Want to git shet of her."

"Won't go, won't go. Ain't a-goin' to leave my masta. Goin' to stay right whure I is, right here, right in this tavern," Daisy mumbled *sotto voce,* over and over with variations.

Pearl heard, but at first ignored, the woman's protest. At length it annoyed him. "Dry up that god damn talkin' an' clean the god damn floor," he commanded.

Hammond's back was toward the door when he felt a slap on his shoulders and turned to confront Lewis Gasaway, vigorous, beaming and expansive. "Howdy, Lew. Have a drink," Hammond greeted him. "And Lije, howdy. Is Lije drinkin?"

"Reckon it won't hurt him none, and the Old Woman don't find out.

Purty hard to keep corn out'n a Gasaway," answered the elder brother. Lewis was himself but twenty-three, and Elijah, who stood apart from the group at the bar, was but fifteen. His diffidence was aggravated not only by his youth but by an awareness of the acne which covered his face and of the unshaved fuzz that grew between the pustules. With an abashed grin, he reached for the glass of spirits his brother handed him, as much an earnest of his inclusion in the adult circle as it was a refreshment after his long ride.

After introducing Charles to the strangers, Hammond asked, "You didn't fetch no nigger? Stopped fightin' em?"

"Plowin'," Lewis explained laconically.

Elijah, emboldened by his drink, was moved to add, "Lew tried to sneak Cudjo out, but Papa caught him an' given him hell. Didn't he, Lew?"

"The Ol' Man godly, don' like fightin', that is 'lessen I wins an' fotches home a good, young saplin'."

"Ain't none of 'em agin' it an' they wins," declared Pearl.

"Whure your own fighter?" Lewis demanded of Hammond. "Keep sayin' as how you goin' to git one. Old Man won't have it? Eh?" He was trying to extricate himself from the implication of his dependence upon his father's will.

"Got me one," announced Hammond.

"Whure's he at? Whyn't you fetch him?" asked Pearl with interest.

"Got to train him some. Ain't broke in yet," said Hammond.

"A great big Mandingo buck. That's right, ain't it, Ham? Mandingo?" Charles was not sure of his nomenclature and had no idea what a Mandingo might be. "Bet he could kill any these other bucks Cousin Ham put him agin', withouten no breakin'. He vicious, I tells you, vicious."

"He strong, all right, an' if he fight. Don't know yet whut inside him. Sort of awkward like, too." Hammond's estimate was motivated by more than modesty; he did not want to discourage whatever easy matches the inexperience of his boy might encourage his antagonists to arrange.

"Threat him you goin' to burn him an' he won't fight," Holden suggested. "A hot iron will make any of 'em fight."

"Might be," Hammond dismissed the idea.

Men and boys were straggling in, the men buying drinks for themselves and for each other, the young boys, unless they were accompanied by an elder, standing away from the bar, their sobriety marked as much by a repugnance for the taste of whiskey as by the lack of money to buy it. Most of the boys had nickles, dimes, quarters to back their judgments in the fights, and the others came as spectators. Pearl tolerated the youths as potential customers at the bar when they should be older, but saw to it that they did not usurp space better occupied by actual patrons.

"You craves to stay an' watch these fuggin' fights, you god damn younguns got to stay out of gen'leman's ways that wants to buy they drinks," Pearl told the younger boys. "An' stop that fuggin' wrastle an' keep still. Purty soon,

some of 'em gits hurt an' the damn temp'ance an' preachers say I done it. Hear?"

The boys retreated and grew gravely quiet for a few minutes, but they were not afraid of Pearl.

Doc Redfield sauntered in with a new aplomb which prosperity had given him. He saw Hammond in the crowd at the bar, singled him out, and insisted upon buying a drink. "Well, well, well, we're neighbors now, a'most," he said.

"Almos'," Hammond agreed without enthusiasm. He had not seen Redfield since his marriage and didn't know whether to mention it or not. He was at a loss for terms in which to congratulate the man, whose marriage had been, by his own confession, only for the purpose of acquiring the midwife's property and slaves.

Redfield was not so reticent. "Ain't seen you sence I done it. The Widder had me."

"I been hearin'," Hammond said.

"Ain't goin' to 'gratulate me?"

"Course, course," said Hammond, still unable to see why congratulation was in order. "Have a drink."

"Don't hardly ever come to Benson no more, 'ceptin' Satidays to see the fights. Got my own niggers to doctor up and snake, now. Right smart responsibility, a passel of niggers," declared Redfield.

"Ain't got a young buck to trade, have you, fer my Daisy?" Pearl inquired. "Daisy a breeder, but I cain't have it around a tavern."

"Might consider. Might consider," said Redfield with unction.

"Ain't sayin' Daisy air a damn fuggin' fancy slut, but—," Pearl qualified his proposal.

Redfield turned to Hammond. "Yet pleasured that big Mandingo wench, son?" he asked aloud. Then he told the story of his summons to Falconhurst to treat Big Pearl, only to find nothing more ailed her than that she was enamored with her young master. He omitted no detail of the girl's examination, and roared with laughter as he described her precipitate retreat from the pest house after the diagnosis.

"Whut you do, Ham?" asked Gasaway. "Crave that I should come over an' he'p out, or sen' Lije here? Lije don't puke up at a little black musk. Does you, Brother?"

Lije's acne suffused with blushes as he hung his head to conceal them.

Hammond faced the embarrassment with an explanation. "We got a big buck to mate up to that wench. She done quieted," he declared factually if not quite truthfully. He was glad to have the conversation diverted from himself by Lew Gasaway's persistence in badgering Elijah.

"Lije got him a little black slut all knocked up a'ready, ain't you, Lije? When that sucker come yaller, my Old Man goin' to skin the hide off'n Lige an' the slut too," Lew prophesied.

Elijah turned from the bar and wiped a tear of vexation from his eyes.

"Don' plague the boy, Lew," said Hammond with compassion, placing his hand on Elijah's shoulder. " 'Cause you steals all your pa's yaller wenches time they gits ripe ain't no why to cod Lije 'cause he pesters the black ones."

In the midst of the fuddled chatter, Alonzo Kyle arrived, herding before him two Negroes, who took their places against the wall alone. Kyle was a florid, heavy, low-set man of something under forty, and was out of breath in fear that he was late.

"No fightin' yet? Whure all you-all's niggers? he demanded. "Ain't nobody fightin'? Mine ready."

There was a murmur of explanation about why nobody else had brought his fighter.

"Ol' One Eye," said Lew Gasaway surveying Kyle's larger slave. "Whut you want, that somebody's nigger goin' to gouge out the other eye?"

"Sweetness there jist crave to fight. I don' whet him none. He implore to come along, didn't you Sweetness?"

"Yas, suh, Masta; yas, suh," replied the black man with enthusiasm. "Give me 'nough corn and I kill that nigger, any nigger they is. Ah loves to wrassle, wrassle as good with one eye as both on 'em."

"That the one Percy's nigger gouged the eye out'n last month?" asked Holden, who knew that it was.

"Yes. That Sweetness," affirmed Alonzo.

Charles strolled over and felt of Sweetness through his clothes, and then called Hammond aside. "Let me ride to Falconhurst an' fetch Mede. That nigger cain't fight. Mede don' need no breakin' to lick that 'un."

"No," said Hammond.

"Please, suh," begged Charles. "An' if you don' they ain't a-goin' to be no fight at all." He was pathetic in his youthful eagerness. "Why won't you?"

"Look at his bettin' saplin'," Hammond sniffed in his contempt. "Little, scrawny, knob-kneed, pot-bellied varmint. My Papa would laugh at me, if I won that kind of nigger an' carry him home. He wouldn't waste feed on growin' him."

It was apparent that there would be no fight. While much whiskey was consumed, Pearl knew that the crowd had assembled primarily to watch the fights and only incidentally to drink, and he foresaw future Saturdays when customers, now disappointed, would not come.

"It them fuggin' preachers keeps 'em away," Pearl declared. "Gen'lemen losin' in'erest in the damn fightin'—jest when I squandered good money a-building that god damn fence around the back yard so as ladies and preachers an' sich couldn't look in an' see whut goes on."

"Now, now, now, Pearl. 'Sall right, 'sall right," Old Man Waddington, tipsy and talkative, consoled the tavern keeper. "Gent'men plowin' their niggers this week. Next week ever'body will fetch a fightin' buck, ever'body. You jest wait."

"If men stops a-fightin', nigger blood will jist run out, whut you calls it,

degenerate. Got to fight 'em to keep up the fuggin' stock—jest like racin' hosses," Pearl reasoned.

"Tha's right," echoed Kyle. "Stands to reason. An' you don't fight 'em an' tes' 'em out, folks will go a-breedin' from puny bucks an' niggers will jes' peter right out. You'll see if'n they don't."

Most of the younger boys had departed and the men were leaving. "Jes' one more drink ever'body, an' I reckon I better take my niggers and git home," despaired Alonzo Kyle, spinning a gold coin on the counter.

Pearl filled the glasses for the company and took a drink for himself. As he counted out Kyle's changes from the cash box under the bar, he broached a subject that he had been thinking about for the last half hour. "How about, 'Lonzo, you swappin' me that little one fer that damn slut I got around here, that Daisy?"

"Ain't thought nothin' about it," Kyle procrastinated. "Al'ays ready to trade."

Pearl raised the hinged shelf at the end of the bar to let himself out and walked over to the wall where the two slaves stood together. He drew the younger, a black, flat-faced pubescent toward him and felt superficially of his muscles and explored his mouth.

"Skin down, skin down, Trinket, an' let the white man look at you," the owner ordered.

The slave only rolled his eyes in his failure to understand. Pearl said, " 'Sall right an' you say he sound. You warrantee him."

"When I say skin down, I means skin. Trinket, stan' outen them god damn clothes." Alonzo reached for the boy, but Sweetness was beforehand and in a trice had removed the two garments, leaving the boy naked and assuaging the owner's anger.

"See whut I means?" Hammond with a glance at the rachitic youth, turned to Charles and said *sotto voce,* "Leg weakness. Never take on no rickety, wormy varmint like that."

Pearl was not so particular and was soon satisfied. "Want I should shuck down the slut?"

"Hell, no," said Kyle, spitting on the floor. "I seen her two, three times—makes me want to puke."

"Git her away from this tavern an' you kin starve her down. Make you a good breeder. How'll you trade?"

"Fifty dollars boot," suggested Alonzo.

"I'll take it," Pearl agreed quickly.

"I mean me. I'll take fifty an' the wench fer the buck."

"Oh, no. Couldn't give it. Not a fuggin' cent. Even. Whut say?" Pearl retreated behind the bar.

Alonzo lifted the boy and stood him on the bar. "This buck most a hand already. Three, four, five years he bring seven hunderd, maybe eight, right

on the block. Won't cost you nothin' to feed with all the swill you got in a tavern."

"I know, I know; an' my slut spewin' out suckers all over your fuggin' plantation. Whut you reckon, Doc Redfield? You got a lot of niggers and you knows 'em. Whut fair?"

"I reckon about twenty-five dollars between 'em," Redfield pontificated.

"An' a round of drinks fer everybody," added Kyle.

Pearl began setting out the glasses in his haste to close the bargain.

Waddington, who had retired to a chair, got to his feet and staggered to the bar. "The little nigger need a drink of corn, too. He in this celebration," he suggested.

"Don't want him drinkin'. I'm temp'ance fer niggers. Learn him to steal, jest like Daisy, locked up here alone nights."

"Cure him, Cure him," argued Waddington. "He won't like it. Make him drunk straight off an' he won't touch it."

"A saplin' drunk kin be right comical," opined Redfield. "Let's fill him."

The naked Trinket still stood on the counter and failed to comprehend the transaction of which he was a part. He understood only the proposal to do something to him, although he did not know what, and was indifferent. Pearl foresaw the purchase of numerous rounds of drinks for the company in the process of getting the boy drunk, and he reached under the counter for the rusty tin cup in which he served whiskey to Negroes whose masters infrequently bought it for them.

"Whe' Daisy? She in this too," said Waddington.

"Not Daisy," objected Kyle. "She got to straddle that mule behin' Sweetness goin' home. I don' wants her drunken."

Pearl called her anyway and she waddled out. "I done sol' you," he told her, "an' I don' wan' a fuggin' word out of you."

Daisy flung herself, screaming, on her fat knees. "No, no, no, Masta, suh, Masta. Don' sell me, no, no, no. I don' want to be nobody's nigger. I wants to stay with you, Masta Pearl. Who goin' to do your work? Who goin' clean your tavern? Who goin' eat your scrapin's? I won't go! I ain't a-goin'! You cain't."

Pearl turned to Kyle, shrugging, and said, "She yourn. Do whut you craves to the damn slut. Ain't my business."

Kyle took the woman by the arm and lifted her to her feet. "Now, look here, Daisy," he told her, "you mine now. You goin' with me; ain't no arguin'. You goin'; hear?"

"Yas, suh, Masta," Daisy said.

"I good, jus' masta, an' if'n you a good servant. Now, jest you go over there with Sweetness; I goin' to give you to him fer a wife, kind of. You have a good time raisin' suckers."

Sweetness objected, "Masta, I already got me wife, suh, over at Roselawn Plantation whure I come from."

"That jest a broad wife. A nigger had ought to have a home wife, an' not go traipsin' ever' Sunday. Ain't no use to crave no pass to Roselawn; you goin' to stay home an' pester Daisy."

"My broad wife got three chilern," Sweeetness interposed. "I don't want—"

"She got 'em, yes," Kyle conceded; "you ain't got nothin', 'ceptin' Daisy. You don't think them suckers yourn, does you? You only at Roselawn Sundays, an' other bucks pesterin' your broad wife six days a week. Better settle down with this nice fat piece, an' be satisfy. Feel of her; finger her. Ain't she nice?"

"Yas, suh, Masta, suh. Daisy all right," Sweetness agreed. "An' if, please suh, I could jest have a drink of corn. Jus' one cupful, Masta, please suh, to git me used to her?"

"Ain't wastin' no corn on usten you up to her," Kyle refused Sweetness. "An' you don' usten tonight, you will tomorrow night or nex' week. Remember, I goin' to as' Daisy whether you usten or not."

"Yas, suh, Masta, suh. I will. I will. I likes 'em sof' an' fat. But, please, suh, Masta, jest a little cup of corn. I ain't had none. I good as Trinket."

"Trinket ain't ourn no more. You gits your corn afore you fights. No fightin', no corn. Spark Daisy while I have my drink, an' we'll go. But be quiet."

Kyle turned back to the bar, where the rest of the party, drinks in hand, waited for him to mollify his blacks. Pearl handed the rusty cup to Trinket, who stood patiently on the counter above the crowd.

The boy held the cup while the party drank. "Drink your fuggin' corn!" Pearl commanded him, grasping him by the ankle.

Trinket looked blankly at his new owner and raised the cup to his mouth. The smell of it contorted his features. He closed his eyes, grasped the cup with both hands, and tried to drink. The whiskey burned his throat and gagged him. He involuntarily spat it out on the counter, spraying Old Man Waddington, and slopping whiskey from the cup.

"Give it here," said Pearl. He refilled the cup, this time full to the brim and handed it back to the little Negro. "Don' slop, an' drink it, drink it right down, ever' fuggin' drop."

Trinket tried. He couldn't. The whiskey refused to go down his throat. Rather, it slopped from the cup and trickled down his belly. Pearl jerked the boy's legs from under him, causing him to fall sitting onto the bar. Pearl grasped him firmly by the back of the neck with one hand and tilted the boy's head; with the other hand he took the cup from the boy and poured the contents into his mouth. Trinket swallowed as best he was able and sputtered against his will.

The child cried. "Mammy! I want my mammy," he wept.

"Fug yo' mammy. You ain't got no mammy," Pearl, beginning himself to

be drunk, laughed, and the crowd laughed. "This corn better fer you than any mammy milk."

"Come on, Cousin Charles," said Hammond turning away. "We got to go. 'Member me to git that Doctor Mulbach's oil."

"Wait a minute. He goin' to puke up, and Mista Pearl goin' to pore more in," insisted Charles.

"Let him. I'm goin' home," declared Ham.

Lew Gasaway detached himself from the crowd in front of the bar and came over to Hammond. "Fetch that new buck, nex' week. I craves to see him."

"Mayhap. And you fetch your Cudjo," Ham replied. "We kin prob'ly match 'em. But, no knocky-kneed trash fer bettin' with. I 'on't want no turd like that one Lonzo got shet of."

Lije's diffidence was drowned in corn. "Reckon we kin sneak out that Star?" he said, grasping his brother's sleeve. "Mista Ham, here, goin' to like Star. He straight, an' soun', an' strong."

"Best sap Papa's got," confirmed Lew.

"I'll fetch a purty yaller saplin' too," promised Hammond.

"I knows you will. You got lots. Kin 'ford to lose one. Evenin'."

"He pukin', like I said," protested Charles. "Let's wait. Mista Pearl, he pourin' out more."

"Come along," said Ham.

It was long past supper time when the horses turned in at Falconhurst. Meg stood on the gallery, and tried unsuccessfully to restrain himself from bouncing up and down when he saw Hammond. He knew its unseemliness.

The boys dismounted and gave their horses to Vulcan to take to the stable.

"Masta, suh, Masta, suh, supper ready! Awaitin'," Meg cried hysterically in his joy at his master's return.

If he had not passed so close to Meg in crossing the gallery to enter the house, Hammond would have ignored the commotion; but it involved no deviation from his course to reach out and with his open hand slap the young slave across the face. "Dry up!" he said without rancor.

Hammond found his father sitting before the fire, toddy in hand, bare feet resting upon the naked belly of Alph, supine in front of his chair.

"Son, my rheumatiz jist been rackin' me again. I thought I'd dreen some of it out," the father explained as the son crossed the room. "Whut fer you so late? Supper gittin' col'."

"Had gotten to git this serpent oil," Ham offered as an explanation. "Two bottles; one seem not to hol' much. Sure is potent dose; tell all about on the outside."

"It good," the older man admitted. "Nigger, git my slippers."

"You've et?" Hammond stated rather than inquired.

"Hell, no; an' I'm hongry. Ain't no comfort eatin' afore you gits here."

Meg had mixed toddies, and served them just as Memnon rang the dinner bell.

"Don't need 'em nohow," said Hammond, sipping his drink and setting it aside. "Drinkin' corn at Pearl's."

"Win or lose on the mains? Charles git his bellyful of blood?"

"No fights—not one," sighed Charles. "But Mista Pearl was drinkin' a saplin' he bought, corn, when Cousin Ham left, teachin' him how not to steal." Hammond clarified Charles's incoherence and his own disgust.

"Might cure the nigger," opined the old man, "but ain't no fun watchin' the bugger puke. Pearl wantin' to do it, it his nigger, but not public."

"Right comical," was Charles' opinion.

"That there young nigger's belly don't ease my rheumatiz much after all. Reach me your arm, Memnon," the invalid made concessions to his pain. His Negro led him gently and seated him carefully at the table.

"Reckon you too painful to muss with Big Pearl an' Mede today?" Hammond hazarded.

"Not personal, no," replied his father. "But I tol' Lucretia Borgia. Reckon she coupled 'em. She didn't say."

"Want my mammy, Masta, suh? Want Lucretia Borgia?" Meg craved more details upon the subject, and Ham gave his assent.

The cook came, self-consciously, adjusting her dress, with Meg at her heels all ears. "This nigger say you wants me," she declared and waited. She knew full well why she had been summoned.

"How you make out coverin' Big Pearl?" Hammond inquired. "She take him?"

Lucretia Borgia grinned widely and chuckled low in her throat. "He got that black wench good, yas, suh, Masta, suh."

"No trouble, then?"

"Naw, suh, no trouble afta' I show that big buck how, 'ceptin' I had to whack that black slut to still her down."

"Mede didn't hurt Big Pearl none?" Hammond was relieved.

Lucretia Borgia snorted. "But she most ruint him!"

Hammond rose from his chair. "How? Why you let her?"

"Jest bite an' scratch, suh. Ain't nothin'. That she-gyascutus pow'ful vig'ous, I tells you."

"Mede right potent too, ain't he?"

"Reg'lar jackass!" Lucretia Borgia stiffened her forearm and clenched her fist. "Jest seein' him set me goin', my own self. Reckon, could I use him some, please, suh, Masta, suh?"

"You ain't needin' no buck, Lucretia Borgia, now. Mem still good, ain't you, Memnon?" the elder man looked at his servant.

"Mem triflin', ever sence his lambastin', suh," the woman argued. "That sucker in my belly don' kick, not even squirm. Mede mayhap put vigor in it, please, suh."

"I wants to save Mede fer fightin'; don' you go dreenin' off his strength," Hammond settled the question.

Lucretia Borgia recognized her defeat. "Yas, suh, Masta, suh," and started to leave the room.

Charles spoke up, "On'y you ain't fightin' him. Jest lettin' him rot."

"You still feedin' Mede up, Lucretia Borgia, ain't you? Raw eggs, an' all?" Hammond asked. "Meat a plenty."

"Yas, suh, I'm feedin' him. Don't like eggs, but the more he don' like 'em, the more I pours 'em down. And pot-licker; that stren'thenin'. Lots of pot-licker."

"Fattin' up a nigger makes them lazy. Lean fighter best. Starve 'em down, an' rub 'em with whiskey outside; that's what all the gen'lemen does around Centerville," declared Charles.

"Mine goin' to fight fat. Tha's all. An' serpent oil better than corn. Says right on the bottle."

"Keep niggers a-feedin'," said the old man, quieting the discussion.

"How it be, we fight these two saplin's tomorrow? Matched right even," Charles proposed, looking at Alph and Meg.

"Whut good? Nobody to bet," said Ham.

"We kin bet, you and me. I take either one," Charles parried.

"Might as well fight wenches,"

"Be jist as good. You got plenty wenches."

"But not fightin' 'em," Ham declared with finality.

"I been trainin' Jason some," Charles continued possessively. "Might put him in agin' a wench, not too big."

"Train Jason all you wants. But you ain't goin' to fight him." Hammond pushed back his chair and rose. "Feel better, Papa?"

"My hands hurts me. Mayhap better hold them, 'stead of my feet, agin' the buck." He pushed Mem aside and walked slowly back to the fire. "Mayhap a toddy—"

Charles strode restlessly about the room and came to rest in front of the fire, extending his hands toward it, although they were not cold.

"You're fattenin', son," the elder Maxwell said to him. "Makin' right good color." It seemed so in the firelight.

Charles felt of himself. "An' the pimples dryin', too," he boasted. "Wish somethin' happen to my cock-eye."

"Nev' mind that. Falconhurst vittles ain't goin' to cure that. Howsumever an' nevertheless, you goin' to be right comely someday, way you goin'."

"Not like Brother Dick an' Cousin Hammond an' them," Charles lamented.

"Well, no." In the father's eyes nobody could compare with Hammond. "But we'll sen' you back to Crowfoot in a week or like, an' your own mamma won't know you."

Charles straightened. "I likes it here better," he said. "Don't crave to leave. Besides I wants to see Ham's buck fightin'."

"Course, course. No hurry," said Maxwell, "but your papa gittin' anxious, I warrant."

"Papa know whure I at," Charles lied.

The old man had relented in his dislike of the callow youth. "You so much stouter 'an when you come, you had ought to have a wench tonight; whut do you reckon, Ham?"

"Drinkin' all that corn today is like to make him horny," Ham speculated. "I reckon so."

"Pick out a nice plump one and send Meg out to the cabins to fetch her. Lucretia Borgia kin wash her and take her up."

Charles blushed and shook his head. "I's all right," he said.

"Go too long, ain't good fer you. You'll start a-losin' again," insisted the old man.

The boy felt the blush searing his face and strolled into the shadows away from the fire. "Gotten out of the way of it, I reckon," he explained.

"We got some as good as Katy, but you cain't larrup ourn like you done your own," Ham said.

" 'Tain't that," said the boy. "I jest don't want none."

"Goin' without won't hurt, an' he don't want it," said Hammond, baffled and incredulous.

"But whut will Major Woodford think of Falconhurst?" queried the owner.

"Papa won't know," said Charles, closing the subject.

He sat awhile and swallowed a toddy which he didn't want. After a decent, bored interval he commanded Meg, "Fetch me that Jason, and I'll go up. Ridin' today kind of petered me."

When the creak of the stairs indicated that Charles was out of hearing, the father asked, "Whut do you reckon?"

"He's kind of fretted about no fight in Benson. Fights whet him up. No good without 'em."

"Jason say Masta Charles is good masta. Take him in bed an' ev'thin'." Meg interposed.

"Nobody care whut Jason say," Hammond answered. "You, Meg, goin' to git hung up, first thing, jist like Memnon, messin' in white talk. Don't dast treat a nigger good."

"They takes an ell," said his father. "Trust a nigger to take an ell."

It had been discussed and decided what hands would be put to plowing and just what areas would be allotted to each. The mules and oxen had been brought in from pasture, the plows had been freed from rust, their shares sharpened and repointed. A restless anxiety to get the task under way prompted Hammond to ride over the plantation.

He had ordered Eclipse to be saddled and brought to the house, and was about to mount when he was interrupted by Lucy who had lain in wait for

him to come out of the house. He saw Big Pearl peeking around the corner of the cabin even before her mother pounced on him. He paused to listen to her, annoyed at her intrusion, despite that she was a pet of his father's and he was obliged to hear her plaints.

"Masta, suh, please, suh, Masta Ham," she began, looking at the ground and unable to proceed.

Hammond knew it was a petition which the woman was dubious that he would grant. "Whut is it now, Lucy? Whut you wants?" he asked with no betrayal of his impatience.

"Masta, suh, Big Pearl craves to marry," Lucy blurted.

"Marry? You knows better 'n that. Wench think she married, she cry an' carry on if'n we sells her buck, even an' if we has to hang him up. Big Pearl all right like she be. Old Masta wants Big Pearl fer that Mede. You, too." Hammond placed his boot in the stirrup.

"That whut Big Pearl mean. She crave to take up with that big buck. Kin she? Not marry. Jes' take up. She call that marry. She tell the other wenches she marry."

Big Pearl could stand the suspense about the verdict no longer. Unable to hear the whole of the conversation from her retreat, she bounded across the open space between the cabins and the house and stood behind her mother.

"Big Pearl wear that Mede out, dreen his stren'th that I wants to fight with," Ham objected.

"Naw, suh. Naw, suh, please, Masta," Big Pearl pleaded on her own behalf.

"Besides I wants him fer Lucy here too, mayhap fer other wenches too, an' your sucker by him vig'ous; an' I craves to sell him, I craves to sell him, 'thout'n your put in."

"Yes, suh; yes, suh," Big Pearl admitted defeat.

" 'Sides, if your sucker puny, we try another boy fer the nex' one."

"I goin' to bring a good, vig'ous sucker fer you, Masta. I goin' to earn me that whole dollah. Yas, suh."

"Mede didn't hurt you then, didn't tear you none?" Hammond asked to confirm Lucretia Borgia's testimony.

"Naw, suh. Mede right good an' monst'ous, on'y he never bust me right open like you done. Naw, suh." Big Pearl giggled in her recollection of the honor her master had paid her.

Hammond had seen Mede and knew that the girl was flattering the white man. He none the less relished the favorable comparison and forestalled his final negative answer to the woman's plea. "We'll see about that takin' up," he said and rode away, leaving them.

Familiar since his childhood with every crevice and cranny of Falconhurst, Hammond's excursion was supererogatory as any contribution to his plan for plowing. It served only to relieve his restlessness and his need to do something. His healthy body enjoyed to function.

Returned from his ride, he found his father and Charles in idle discussion of the comparative fighting skills of black and yellow Negroes. "Don't rest on the shade, nohow," declared Maxwell, "like it do on the tribe. Angolas got no bottom, jes' lays down on you, don't try. Take a Cromantyne, now, he quick and he fast an' he willin', loves fightin'; but he hard to manage, apt to turn an' you has to kill him. The bes' is a Mandingo an' if you make him mad, but Mandingos is hard to rile. They gentle-like, like dogs, always cravin' to be petted."

"Whut I say," opined Charles, "yaller bucks is best. Human blood make a nigger smart."

"Tender, tender, make 'em tender. Smartness sink right in and covers up. Ain't no nigger kin be smart."

Hammond waited for a resolution of the pointless argument, and at length he interposed, "About Mandingos, Lucy and Big Pearl cravin' to take up with Mede."

"Whut you tell 'em?" the father asked, and Hammond explained the petition.

"Least, you'd know whut Mede do nights," Maxwell nodded.

"He sleep nights, nohow. Sleepin'est boy on the place," countered Hammond. "Trus' him to not skylark aroun'."

"You ain't sellin' him."

"Not, an' he fight. Mayhap want to put Big Pearl to 'nother buck nex' time, an' this one come runty or idiot from in-breeding."

"Change off, then. Wench crave to rid herself'n him that time. When I goin' to learn you—do whut you wants with niggers an' they accommodates you? You too soft with 'em. Course, Mandingos different: got to cod Mandingos, an' you wants 'em not to pout."

"Them two big wenches drain the sap right out'n that boy. Won't be no good fer fightin'."

The father snorted, "Give him to the two on 'em, and they won't. Neither one let the other'n have him."

"Then you thinks—"

"Sho' do. Besides they kin serpent-oil him good fer you. That stuff got to be kneaded in—right in to the jints an' leaders. Don't do jest to pour it on. Got to work it in, an' you wants him wriggly an' shiny like a varmint."

"Well, an' you says," Ham assented. "Dinner et, an' I'll shuck Mede down an' have them wenches to serpent-oil him up good."

Maxwell opened and closed his hand and looked at it speculatively and then rubbed his knee. "Rheumatiz gits no worse after dinner, I'll go along with you to the cabin and watch that rubbin', show you how to embrocate."

"Do you good. Sun right bright-like out," Hammond approved.

"I'll watch. That oilin' make Mede vig'ous, I use some on my boy," declared Charles.

"It too costive to was'e," objected the old man.

"I got money. I buy me a bottle fer Jason nex' Satiday."

"Besides it stink, stink like polecat. Cain't stan' no serpent-oiled nigger in the house," Maxwell discouraged the project. "Got to keep him outdoors an' you oils him up."

"That case—" Charles abandoned his intention without completing his sentence.

Dinner out of the way, Maxwell drank another toddy and gave one to Alph. The day was so warm that there was little need of a fire and smoldering embers were little more than a token sacrifice to the lares.

Hammond took down from the mantelpiece one of the bottles of Dr. Mulbach's Serpent Oil, shook it violently and held it to the light. He sat down and leaned over, propping his elbows on his knees, to spell out the statements on the label of the flat bottle.

"Dr. Mulbach's Serpent Oil," he read. "The sovereign oleamen to promote the puissance of the musculature and the flexation of the articulative processes. Applied copiously to the masculine organs of generation, it assures supreme induration, facilitates penetration, and renders the act of kind more felicitous.

"Dr. Mulbach's Serpent Oil is an elixir rendered from the oleaginous portions of various ophidian genera, supplimented by the addition of costly gums and balsams from the uttermost parts of the known universe. Compounded from a secret formula handed down to Dr. Mulbach from untold generations of his Aesculapian ancestors, it was appreciated by the victorious gymnasts of ancient Hellas and by the Roman gladiators, synthesized from the identical ingredients employed by its present manufacturers. Many kings and monarchs have been rendered potent by its use. Dr. Mulbach's Serpent Oil is in daily use by the Sultan of Turkey and is recommended by him to all pashas with a numerous seraglio. No modern acrobats, contortionists, or pugilists would contemplate their spectacular feats without this marvelous adjuvant.

"To obtain the superlative result of which Dr. Mulbach's Serpent Oil is capable, it must be applied freely with maximum friction and manipulation of the joints. It should be patted into the muscles with great force and well kneaded.

"Accept no substitute. Use only Dr. Mulbach's Serpent Oil.

"Fabricated and distributed only by

"Dr. Mulbach's Serpent Oil Company,

"Rampart Street

"New Orleans, Louisiana, U.S.A."

Hammond read aloud, so far as he was able to spell out the words; he made little effort to understand their meaning. He was none the less impressed by this verbiage. "Reckon Redfield would know whut signify all this doctor-talk. But stuff must be good. Um, Um!"

"Good? It sovereign," declared the father.

"That whut the sticker say right here—sovereign o-l-e-a-m-e-n," con-

firmed Ham. "Boy, fetch me that stopper-twister from yo' mammy."

Meg brought the corkscrew and stood expectant while his master opened the magic flask. The cork came out more easily than was anticipated and a few drops of the contents splashed upon the carpet. Ham put the bottle to his nose, sniffed the contents, and wrinkled his face, after which he replaced the cork part way and held the bottle at arms length. "It powerful vig'ous," he said, shaking his head.

His father reached for the bottle, removed the cork, sniffed and nodded. "I tol' you it smell like polecat," he nodded and handed the bottle back to the son.

Charles in turn smelled the snake oil. His comment was, "Sure smell like old nigger shit. Wouldn't rub that on Jason an' it make him strong as Mike Fink."

"Scare up that Mede an' carry him out under the tupelo. Tell him I say," Hammond instructed Meg.

The boy started on his errand and glanced through the window. "He right there now under the old tupelo, sleepin'," Meg reported.

"Wake him an' tell him we comin' an' wantin' him."

The father got to his feet and summoned Memnon who was not to be found. Maxwell reviled him *in absentia* and fell back upon Lucretia Borgia, always available, to adjust the blue coverlid about his shoulders and to lead him across the open space to Lucy's cabin. Lucretia Borgia placed her muscular arm around his back, adjusted her step to his, and let him take his slow time.

Mede got to his feet and rubbed his eyes. "You want me, Masta, suh?" he asked.

"Step out'n them clo's. Shuck down an' leave 'em here under the tupelo. Goin' to snake oil you down and limber you up," Hammond explained.

Charles ran his hand over Mede's flank and exclaimed in admiration, "This buck kill that Sweetness of Mista Kyle's. One belt, jes' one belt an' Sweetness stretch out daid."

"I rub on the stuff, after you snakes him, Masta, suh," said Meg, "like I done Mem?"

"You git snaked an' rubbed your own self you don't go on back in that house and dry up. Nobody brung you," Hammond chided the boy who obeyed reluctantly and looked behind him as he went.

The party encountered Big Pearl as she emerged from the cabin, balancing a bucket on her head on her way to the well. "Put down that thing an' come along an' rub this buck of your'n—your'n and your mammy's, that is," commanded Hammond. "Whure Lucy?"

They found Lucy kneeling by a tub in which stood a crying Belshazzar, in process of being bathed none too gently. "Measly buck, ain't got more meat than a jacksnipe. Masta sell you, he lucky to git back the pone it take to grow you."

"It the frame. The frame makes a nigger. That Shaz all right, Lucy. Quit doggin' him. He makin' frame now, cover with meat later," said Maxwell, entering the cabin and looking at the wet boy.

"His paw too young; that the matter with Shaz," Lucy rebutted. "Little, young buck cain't bring vig'ous sucker."

"What was his sire?" asked Maxwell. "I disremember."

"You knows—that big bright yaller you sol' three, four year back, name of Sulla, Silla, som'pin' like that. Wasn't hardly more than a saplin' when I laid to him."

The old man nodded his head in recollection. "That's right; Sulla. Hadn't ought to sold him, but he gittin' rambunctious."

"Here that new boy," interrupted Hammond. "Papa say it all right fer you an' Big Pearl to have him, but don't wants the two of you wearin' him down."

"I knowed you would, Masta, suh; I jes' knowed it. I tol' Big Pearl this mawnin', suh. Thank'ee, thank'ee. Naw, suh, I won't wear him down," Lucy promised, and looked at Mede. "Um, um," she ejaculated.

"Nor let Big Pearl," cautioned Hammond, looking toward the buxom girl.

"Naw, suh, Masta," she said.

"He yourn," confirmed the old man. "But now you got to embrocate him, an' ever' day."

"Right here, front of ever'body? Shaz, you git yourself outn here. Which one of us?" asked Lucy, misinterpreting the meaning.

"Spread him out on the bed, belly up," Maxwell instructed. "You rub his torso, Big Pearl take care his legs. Masta Ham here pour on."

Mede understood what was expected. He reclined across the bed, arms raised and legs spread. Hammond upturned his bottle and released a trickle of serpent oil over the glabrous flesh, beginning on the chest and moving the bottle downward over the belly and legs. "Come on, work it in," he directed.

The Mandingos began to smear the oil over the body. The more it spread, the greater the stench that arose from it. "That won't do. Got to work it in an' twist the jints," explained the old man. "He ain't brashy, won't come apart, ain't no china doll. Spat him, an' twis' him, an' work him, hard."

The women renewed their efforts, but restrained their strength. To them Mede was, indeed, a great doll which they did not want to destroy. They did not shirk the effort, but their strokes were caresses rather than massage.

"Stan' back," said Maxwell, spitting his tobacco upon the floor. "You, Lucretia Borgia, show 'em how."

Lucretia Borgia advanced. "Gitn away from here," she said, sweeping the Mandingos aside. She raised her skirt to enable her to kneel upon the bed, bent over, and rubbed her hands over the belly to absorb the oil. Not getting enough, she extended her palms to Hammond, who filled them from the bottle. She rubbed them together and went to work in earnest. She rubbed, she kneaded, she pommeled, she contorted, without compunction or mercy. Mede's features writhed with pain, but no sound came from him.

Scorning to ask him to turn, she ran her arms under the boy's body and flopped him over as if turning a pancake, reached for the bottle, poured oil down the spine and over the buttocks, anointed her hands again, took a deep breath and fell to. Not an inch of the skin did she neglect. She plucked out the under-arm hair, the better to work the oil into the flesh. She poured fresh oil over the feet, stretched and twisted the individual toes.

"Set on his back an' hol' him down," Lucretia Borgia commanded Big Pearl. "I goin' to stretch his limbs."

The girl uncomprehendingly did as she was told.

"Hol' him down now; don' let him move," Lucretia Borgia warned as she raised the thigh toward the head. Mede emitted a grunt of pain. "Hollerin' won't git you nothin'," warned the woman; "jist make me bend you higher up." And she seized the other leg.

Meg appeared at the door and Hammond scolded him, "I tol' you to go to house an' keep outn this. Whut you want?"

"Please, suh, Masta, Doc Redfield come. Wantin' I should fetch him?"

"Course, course, carry him here," said Hammond, going to the door and seeing Redfield, who had followed the young Negro. "Come in, come in," he welcomed the newcomer, extending his right hand.

"Whut that stench?" inquired the veterinary. "Kill a skunk?"

"Serpent oil," said Maxwell. "Embrocatin' Ham's new buck. Right gratified you come."

"Whut I wanted to see, that fighter Ham boastin' about havin' yestiday."

"There he lay!" proclaimed Hammond proudly.

"Down sick? Lucky I rid by."

Hammond sniffed. "No. Jest a-oilin' him up. 'Nough fer now, Lucretia Borgia. Let him up."

Big Pearl dismounted from Mede's back, and he got to his feet.

"Take him outside fer Doc Redfield to spy. Crowded in here, and stinks," suggested Maxwell.

"How you feels," demanded Hammond solicitously of Mede. "Tuckered?"

"No, suh, Masta," Mede replied, stretching his neck, flexing his arms, and stiffening his thighs. "I feel extra good, but that Lucretia Borgia is sure lusty. Got no pity or nothin'."

Outside Ham warned Doc Redfield, "Better not finger him. All smeared with that stinkin' oil."

"Doc don' got to finger no nigger to know how he hang together. Old as us, an' you won't have to probe an' punch so much," said Maxwell.

Redfield looked at the boy. "Cain't he stan'?" he asked.

"He proud and horny, like a stallion," Ham made an excuse. "Settle down, Mede."

Redfield reached down and picked up a large twig fallen from the tupelo tree, broke it across his knee and flung the heavy end of it. "Fetch," he commanded, and Mede retrieved it. Redfield nodded his approval and rubbed

his beard with his hand. "You don' reckon any them blades in Benson enough fool to pit them hands they call fighters agin no half-horse an' half-croc like that?"

"They loves to fight niggers," Ham said.

"Best buck ever on Falconhurst," declared Maxwell with a show of modesty.

"Bes' I ever see—anywhures," Redfield expanded.

"But will he fight? Gentle as any kitten," speculated Ham. "Will he fight?"

"If you say fight, Masta, suh—" Mede intruded, causing Hammond to scowl. He refrained from reprimand, however.

The elder Maxwell, who had walked without assistance, suddenly realized that he was fatigued, or that he should be. He adjusted the coverlid about his shoulders and said, "I need a toddy. Come in an' kill some corn by the fire."

"Go in the kitchen an' drink down your eggs," Hammond instructed Mede. "Them eggs makes you shine. Then you kin come back to the tree fer your clothes. We through with you, but recollec' I goin' to plow you an' Big Pearl tomorrow early. You not in the meetin' house no more. You sleeps in the cabin an' do like Lucy tell you; not Big Pearl, mind, but Lucy. You're theirn, but don't let 'em dreen all your sap."

Mede watched Hammond's expression, and indicated his pleasure. "That oil makes me vigorous," he said, flexing his arms.

"Lucy oil you ever' day," Hammond promised from the edge of the gallery.

Redfield and Maxwell had gone into the house and Charles had waited for Ham at the door. "We fights him the Satiday comin'?" he questioned eagerly.

"Mayhap, an' he ready," Ham evaded.

"That Mandingo, as you calls him (I heard a heap about 'em but I ain't never see a sure-enough one before), he had ought to fetch prime suckers," Redfield speculated, reaching for the glass from Meg's tray. "Got me a wench, one of the widder's, I'd like to mix up with him."

Maxwell took a tentative sip from his goblet. "Ham's nigger; got to ast Ham," he said. "Ham taken him up with them two big 'uns. Course, they comes first. After them—mayhaps."

"My wench so advanced that I not sure; but old Cap'n Hightower always used to say an old 'un to a young 'un or vicey versie." Redfield cited. "Ol' Marth ain't had nothin' in comin' three year an' that a puny female, but I figures with a vig'ous young buck—. The widder didn't know more than to mix her with a failin' ol' caitiff, bein' handy. Too modest to ast you or Gasaway fer a strengthy stud."

"Papa know you, Doc Redfield, kin have the use of any buck we got, any time at all," Hammond, who had overheard the colloquy, emphasized his generosity. He was aware of the weight of Redfield's professional counsel at the tavern; the making of many a match waited upon his sanction, and his opinion determined victories otherwise in doubt. "Course, I readyin' this

Mede fer Satidays, but any time you wants him."

Suspicious of the offer, Redfield inquired, "How much he goin' to cost me?"

"You knows I don't begrudge no stud buck to no frien', Doc Redfield; don't give 'em no pass to gallivant, but any friend kin use 'em on a wholesome female," Maxwell confirmed his son's policy. "Pleasures the buck, much as the wench, an' I admires to see 'em chipper."

"Old Mista Wilson say not to never cross a Mandingo agin no other kind of nigger," warned Hammond. "The git come bad niggers."

"Shit," declared the old man with contempt. "Cur-bred niggers ain't no worse than no other kine. Got to keep any of 'em afeared and watch 'em. Ones with human blood in 'em worst of any."

"None of 'em bad afore they big enough to git randy, an' I knows whut to do with bad 'uns then," threatened the veterinarian. No elucidation was necessary, and even Maxwell failed to raise an objection.

Redfield rose and adjusted his hat, which he had not removed, and his host, demurring against his departure, proposed just one more toddy.

"I drunk so much corn yestiday that I cured of drinkin' it almos' as good as that saplin' Pearl got. He cured permanent."

"I craved to linger, but Cousin Ham here wouldn't leave me," Charles remarked. "Mista Pearl make him drunk?"

"Sick, jest sick. Wasn't no fun at all. Kept me there doctorin' him till can'lelight, after ever'body. 'Speck the saplin' goin' to live; but Pearl's corn safe. That boy won't never steal none."

"Ain't no way to treat a nigger, even an' he is pot belly an' knobby," said Hammond. "Nigger didn't do nothin'."

"Now, Ham, don't rile," said his father. "You craves to coddle our niggers, they yourn. That 'un Pearl's. Cain't stan' seein' a nigger abused; it your mamma in you."

"Not 'lessen he done somethin'; I cain't."

"Sold Pearl a lot of whiskey, gen'lemen stayin' to relish that boy," Redfield said in extenuation; "five or six drinks all 'round. Most as good fer sellin' whiskey as fightin' be."

"Reckon fightin' peter out, like Mista Pearl say?" Charles demanded.

"Long as them sportin' gen'lemen in New Orleans goin' to fight their fancy niggers, young planters around Benson goin' to fight their field han's. Gits so that preachers an' them stop it in the tavern, gen'lemen carries bucks to the wood lots an' places preachers don' know; they still fights 'em," Redfield replied.

"Let gen'lemen stop goin' to Benson Satidays to spen' money, an' the preachers change they chune," said Maxwell. "Let yo' heart rest, Cousin Charles."

"Well, I 'speck jest one more toddy, after all, Mista Warren," Redfield sighed. "The widder won't notice. Right hard on the thirst, being married to a widder."

It took longer than Hammond had counted upon to harness the mules, to yoke the steers, to assign the areas to the respective slaves, and to put the plowing under way. The men were young, many of them never having guided a plow before and requiring instruction. Lucretia Borgia left the kitchen in Ellen's inexperienced charge to go to the field and supervise as best she could on foot, while Hammond on Eclipse cantered from plowman to plowman to watch how well the work was progressing.

The master was lenient as pertained to haste, since the fine weather promised to hold and the fields needed another drying day to render the soil friable. His greater concern was that the furrows be deep and straight than that they be rapidly finished. Labor on Falconhurst was leisurely, since the growing of slaves was paramount to the culture of cotton. The boys behind the plows, with few exceptions, were nearing maturity and would be ripe for market the following fall, although they did not suspect the motive of the owner's observation of their strength and agility. His father had taught the boy to watch closely the growth and progress of the hands, to evaluate and reevaluate them constantly, to note and correct their weaknesses where possible, to encourage their strength, to alter their diets to add to or to subtract from their weight. "The stock is fed in the eyes of its master," the old man often quoted, and Hammond took as much satisfaction in the development of a good young Negro as a horseman in the rounding out of a promising colt.

He was pleased when he could find or make work for the hands, for there was not enough to keep them all employed, not that he begrudged them leisure but feared to encourage their indolence. The mere saplings were permitted to grow for the most part with no duties, save that they were taught to chop cotton in the summer and impressed to pick the crop in its season. Hammond did not annoy his slaves by any evidence of his constant surveillance. His sudden appearance in a cabin or in the dormitories in the barn or remodeled meeting house was welcomed rather than resented. A Negro stopped and examined was flattered to exhibit his strength or to be stripped and put through his paces. Neither slave nor master looked upon it as an indignity, and the slave was proud of the attention he evoked.

Mede and Big Pearl were ready early in the morning for their task to be assigned to them, but Hammond was so engaged with his major project that they were forced to stand around in the sunshine to wait for him until almost nine o'clock.

He had been to the house, when he cantered by them and commanded, "Come on and follow me along to the barn," Mede trotted in an endeavor

to keep pace with Eclipse, which was impossible, and Big Pearl brought up the rear.

"I saved that thistle patch under the hill, an' I wants you to plow it. Reckon you kin drag a plow good as a mule?" he addressed Mede.

"Can, if you say, Masta, suh." Mede would have undertaken to move mountains at a white command.

"Then git into them hames," said Hammond, throwing a set of harness on the floor. "Won't need no lines fer Big Pearl to drive with. All you got to do, Big Pearl, is to hold on to that plow an' keep it straight. Mede goin' to pull it."

Adjusting the harness made for a mule to Mede's shoulders was difficult. The straps slipped off or constricted him so that it was impossible to move. Hammond tied knots in the hames to shorten them so that the man would not have to walk so far ahead of the plow as to sacrifice his leverage. Their attachment to the whiffletree tended to lift the end of the plow so much that it was impossible to keep the share in the soil. Hammond adjusted and improvised the harnessing of Mede until at last his traction on the plow seemed evident.

Big Pearl plumped herself upon the floor and waited impatiently for these preliminaries. She guffawed to see Mede in harness, prideful of her domination over him which driving him implied. In the interval, she picked up the whip which Hammond had detached from his belt and laid aside. She cracked it loudly and repeatedly, mumbling to herself and laughing. At length she said aloud, "That how I drives old Mede, jest like he ol' mule. He don't go, I cracks me my whup an' he buckle in."

"You don' do nothin' 'ceptin' keepin' that plow go straight. Y'ain't go to crack no whup over Mede."

"Please, suh, Masta, leaven me tote a snake. I won't use it on Mede. Naw, suh. Let me crack it aroun' to show them niggers," beseeched Big Pearl.

Hammond at length consented, but warned the girl, "You touch that buck with that snake, I goin' to come back an' lif' your dress; tha's all, lif' yo' dress an' pour that snake aroun' yo' laigs."

"Naw, suh, I won't, suh," Big Pearl promised.

When the man was harnessed to his satisfaction, Hammond mounted his horse and ordered Mede to shoulder the plow, pointing out the way to the thistle thicket which was some three furlongs beyond the barn. To utilize the time required for his Negroes to reach it, he rode away to see what progress another inexperienced plowboy was making. He rounded the hillock, and saw that Lucretia Borgia was behind the plow, tramping the furrow with wide-spread legs, and gesticulating her instructions. The cook's tutelage was more drastic and perhaps more abusive than his own might have been but Hammond decided that it was better than he could give. He reined Eclipse and turned toward the thistle patch, reaching it just as Mede came up and discharged his burden. He dismounted, fastened Mede's hames to the whiffletree of the plow, and indicated the direction in which he wanted

the furrows to run. Mede, who had plowed at The Coign, understood his instructions and Big Pearl grasped the plow's handles.

"Keep them han'les up; keep that blade down, an' go straight," Hammond instructed her. "Don' want no crooked first trench."

Mede lunged forward in his harness and the soil began to turn. It was a plodding task, but the man moved as fast as a mule before the plow. The girl tramped after him, impeded in her stride by her need to follow after him. Hammond heard her "geeing" and "hawing" at the boy and urging him forward impatiently. She was unable to refrain from the use of the whip, which she from time to time cracked at Mede's heels, but she was skillful enough to miss them. Mede appeared to ignore the snake. Hammond sat his stallion and watched the plow turn three furrows and asked Mede how he did and whether he was tired, which the boy denied. He did not know fatigue.

The thistle patch had not been plowed for three years, and was so eroded that it was hopeless for cotton land. Hammond had no intention to plant it, but only to knock down the dried thistles and to condition and harden Mede's muscles. He was, for all of his instructions, indifferent to the depth of the plowing or the straightness of the furrows, and was more concerned about the strengthening of his fighter's shoulders than about the preparation of the soil for the crop.

However, the boy moved with such ease and sureness, with the expenditure of so little effort, that the task appeared to fail of its purpose. As plowing, it was successful, but as training for the boy, it seemed to fail. It was too easy for him.

Hammond was about to ride away to another part of the plantation when he saw Big Pearl wield the whip and Mede to flinch from the blow. He got off his horse and waited for them to come up to him.

Angrily he grabbed the whip from the big girl's hand. "Raise that dress, raise it," he ordered, but did not wait for her to comply. He grasped her skirt and turned it to her shoulders, exposing her bare legs and buttocks. Big Pearl began to scream and stamp the ground. "Naw, suh, Masta, naw suh, don' whup me. I never done it. Naw suh, I won't do so no more, I won't, Masta. Please, suh, Masta, no."

Hammond was relentless. He stepped back to give the whip play, and wrapped it sharply around the black thighs, then about the calves. The stripes reddened but the skin held.

"Please, Masta," Mede came to the girl's rescue. "Big Pearl didn't hurt me. She jest play."

The girl shrieked and wept, more at the indignity of being whipped than at the pain.

"Now, pull down yo' dress," the master admonished. "Mede ain't no mule an' you ain't goin' to serve him like none."

"Naw, suh; naw, suh," Big Pearl pouted.

"Cravin' to take up, an' then snakin' yo' buck! I tells Lucy an' she whup you right," Hammond threatened. "I go' to take that boy back, have him sleep in the barn, an' you doesn't want him in the cabin."

"Naw, suh; naw, suh; I craves him, I won't hurt him no more."

"Not with this snake, you ain't a-goin," and Hammond folded the whip and tucked it into his belt. "Now git back to your plowin'." He remounted, and watched the Negroes half down the furrow, after which he cantered away to his duties in other fields.

The master had no compunctions about what he had done. Big Pearl had never been chastised and was treated with an indulgent admiration. Had she struck another slave, she would have been relieved of the whip and soundly admonished, but her striking of Mede was not to be countenanced. Mede had been given her as a mate, and she believed she owned him. She would damned soon find out. The discipline of the wenches on Falconhurst was less severe than that of the boys, but sex was no protection from punishment that was condign, and especially for an offense against the master's major interest, which at the time happened to be Mede.

Fighting of Negroes interested Hammond as much as Charles, with the difference that one rationalized it as a business and to the other it was candidly a sport. Hammond was too serious in his dealing with his slaves to be wanton, and his seriousness never relaxed. He fed them, worked them, trained them, treated them, bred them, sold them, and fought them with a sole motive of profit, as his father had inculcated. Livestock kept happy and comfortable thrives best, and Hammond sought to keep his blacks contented. He relished his vocation and took pride in the discharge of the managerial duties which his father, perforce, intrusted to him. He was a sovereign in his little realm with a sovereign's responsibilities and immunities. He felt himself obliged to be just, upon occasion to be cruel but always in the name of justice. He was even capable of tenderness, which he tried to curb.

The soil was a little too soggy with moisture to break well. Tomorrow, if there was no rain, would be better. The stiff breeze that was blowing would dry the ground, but it might be the forerunner of rain. Hammond scanned the sky for clouds, of which there were only floating wisps, as he made his way back to the thistle patch before he should return to the house for dinner.

He waited for Mede to finish the furrow and commended him. "It turn over nice," he said, "an' you goin' straight, too. Better stop now, you an' Big Pearl, fer noonin'."

"You not goin' to tell my mammy, Masta, suh?" Big Pearl pleaded.

Hammond ignored her. "Tired?" he asked Mede.

The boy flexed his shoulder. "A little, in my uppers," he said. "Nothing."

Hammond was pleased to hear Mede say that he was under muscular tension, since it was not apparent in his looks or behavior. The purpose of the plowing was not to turn the eroded soil but rather to put a strain on Mede's shoulders which would condition him for fighting. For all the effort he seemed

to spend, he might as well have sat under a tree and knit.

"Res' now, an' eat your dinner. The wenches scrub you with serpent oil 'fore bed and rub away all yo' tire." So saying, Hammond went to the house to eat his own meal and to report the details of the morning's work to his father.

Ganymede enjoyed his master's concern for his health and comfort but deemed it unnecessary. The extra rations that Lucretia Borgia forced down his throat more than provided energy for his extra duties, which, while arduous, were no tax upon his strength. Mede was used to kindness at The Coign, and he found it continued at Falconhurst. Above all, he had women, women of his own. Fornication was to Mede not only a pleasure but a relief. Detumescence brought him a calm and a repose he had not known for years. He complied with Big Pearl's exigence only as he chose and his moderation had culminated in her transgression followed by punishment this morning.

Big Pearl was jealous of Lucy, who deferred to her daughter's needs and whom Mede had as yet failed to touch, not because of any reluctance of his own but because Lucy had made no advances to him, nor had his master's instructions in regard to her been specific. He knew that she was allotted to him, or rather he to Lucy, but he was satisfied with Big Pearl and a woman was a woman. The serpent oil massage which Lucretia Borgia had given him had excited his desire which he had tried to conceal from the gallery that had watched it. Vile as the oil made him smell, there was something stimulating in that stench; it was at once nauseating and exhilarating.

Mede released himself from the whiffletree, but it would be troublesome to readjust the harness to his body, so he kept it on him as he and Big Pearl left the thistle patch to climb the slope and to throw themselves on the ground beneath a leafing hickory tree. They had brought no dinner with them, as had many of the other plowmen, but Lucretia Borgia was to send them food from the kitchen.

The shade that fell upon the pair was tessellated by the sunshine which drizzled between the immature hickory leaves, shimmering in the breeze, and continuously altering the pattern upon the ground. The sun on the thistle patch was mildly uncomfortable and the complete shade would have chilled the sweat-covered slaves. The boy reclined supine, knees propped and arms extended above his head, resting. The girl raised her skirt and rubbed her legs where Hammond's whip had lain. By raising her lower legs and contorting to peer between them, she was enabled to see the back of her calves and was disappointed at finding no abrasions in the livid streak that crossed them. By no twisting and turning was she able to see the back of her thighs. At last she lay prone and asked Mede to examine them.

He ran his hand across the bruised flesh and dismissed it. "Nothing;" he said, "just a white band across your bottom. It will get well." Mede adhered to the correctness of speech he had learned at The Coign but which he was trying to relinquish.

"It hurt me," she complained.

"You think it didn't hurt me, you wrapping that snake around me every step. Masta warned you, but I was goin' to wait till he left."

"Didn't mean nothin'. I play like you my ol' mule," Big Pearl pouted. "Masta hadn't no call to do me that way. He got no groun' to snake my laigs—jist showin' off."

"Masta snakes whatever legs he wants. Your legs are his legs to snake when he likes. You are his an' you better mind him, and don't go saying about what Masta ought to do. He knows what he ought."

"I ain't neither Masta's; I yourn," said Big Pearl, insinuating her body toward the boy.

"I thought I was your old mule," Mede scoffed.

"I yourn, and you kin do to me what you wants, whutever you wants."

"I don't want nothing, except to rest and except to eat when Miss Lucretia Borgia sends it."

Big Pearl threw her body across the boy's and nuzzled his neck. "Um, um," she said, "that oil sure smell good. Let's pleasure, right now, let's pleasure."

He pushed her off of him. "Go away," he said harshly. "Let me rest. I got to drag that plow."

"Let's pleasure," Big Pearl insisted. "Us kin. We got time while we waitin' fer that pone to come."

To get rid of the girl, Mede clambered to his feet. "Masta don't want no doing that right out in the open field. You cain't think of anything but that. When Masta want us to, he'll tell us."

"Masta," she said contemptuously, and spat. "Always Masta an' whut Masta crave."

"Better not let him hear you talk like that; me neither."

"Masta craves you gives me a sucker, doesn' he? Well?"

"I expect a sucker is crawlin' around in you right now," said Mede. "You don't need any more pesterin'."

"Naw, suh, naw, suh, Mede, please," Big Pearl begged. "I don' feel nuffin'."

"He little yet;" Mede speculated, "no bigger than your fist."

"Ain't there; ain't even start," she protested.

"Got to save my sap for Lucy, an' after her Masta says a gentleman got another wench he wants pestered." Mede deliberately invited the girl's fury.

"You cain't do it, you cain't do it. I kill 'em, I kill 'em with a ax. You see. I kill 'em, an' I kill you."

"I suppose you kill Masta too. It is his doing."

The food was coming and conversation stopped. Beelzebub, a black stripling in pantaloons, his only garment, approached across the field, a round pan balanced on his head and a pitcher in his hand. He handed the pitcher to Mede and directed, "Miz Lucretia Borgia say them eggs fer you, all en 'em. Um,

um, an' this," lifting the pan from his head, "am fer the both of you."

Mede set the pitcher aside, and Big Pearl took the pan on her lap, tearing a rib from the meat and handing it to Mede along with a piece of pone.

"Side meat. That's good," said Mede, ripping the flesh off the bone with his teeth. "But I don't like eggs, raw like that."

"Um, um; wisht they mine. I likes 'em," said Beelzebub, picking up the pitcher and looking longingly at it contents. He set it down again to avoid temptation.

"You ain't no fighter," said Big Pearl, "no stud nigger neither. You don' need aigs."

"I goin' to be when I's growed, goin' to be stud, Masta say," the boy boasted. "Give me piece that hog, please, suh."

"Suppose you could be, Masta let you," Mede commented, extending a piece of meat. "I never saw you before. Where do you stay?"

"I in barn along with other niggers," the boy explained. "I seen you though. You in meetin' house."

"He in cabin with me now. We's taken up," the girl explained Mede's status. "You Frony's sucker, ain't you, Bub?"

"Naw suh," Beelzebub looked bashfully at the ground, kicking the rotting leaves. "I ain't nobody's. I don't know who my mamma. Ol' Masta got me little offn Masta Sam—I 'on't know he las' name. Give me to Frony to keep till I big enough to barn."

Beelzebub's brief biography prompted Mede to say, "We don't hardly any of us niggers know our mammas, much less our papas. That's for white folks. It doesn't make any difference."

"You talks funny," said Beelzebub. "Cain't you talk like we 'ns? Cain't hardly know whut you says."

"I learned different. My old Masta learn me different. I tryin' to learn to talk right."

"I craves you kin. Masta learn you," Big Pearl said. "You go on, buck, back to house. Me an' Mede craves to be together."

"He goin' to pleasure you?" asked Bub.

"I goin' to drink these eggs an' plow them thistles," Mede declared in a self-conscious effort at the vernacular.

The other plowmen were still at their nooning when Mede returned to his duties, despite the protests of Big Pearl. By the time Hammond got back from dinner, they had turned two furrows and started on the third.

"Time you tuckered out, you quits an' goes in," said the master. "Don' want you all to overstrain."

"I's tar'd a'ready," said Big Pearl.

"Nev' min' you," answered Hammond. "I means Mede."

The lenity inspired the boy to greater exertion; he wished to justify his owner's confidence in his strength. "I rested, Masta, I works better now," he said.

"I doesn't crave you should jade you."

"I won't, Masta, suh."

Hammond rode around the plantation, putting some men back to work after the noon recess, urging on others who had already resumed work, criticizing crooked furrows and shallow ones. He scanned the weather as he rode from field to field. The breeze had died and the day was hot for March.

In something more than an hour he was back at the thistle patch, this time insisting upon Mede's return to the cabin. "Go in now an' tell Lucy to rub you. Don't want you stiffenin' up. Big Pearl, take that harness offn Mede an' you tote that plow fer him and clean it," he directed. "Tell Lucy ben' and twis' you good an' rub in that ol' oil, jes' like Lucretia Borgia."

Despite his protestations, Mede was tired. His shoulders ached and the very thought of lying on the bed and undergoing Lucy's massage was pleasant. As they walked toward the house he wondered whether Big Pearl was going to let him alone; he was too tired for dalliance.

Tuesday, Mede and Big Pearl plowed again until mid-afternoon when Hammond reached the conclusion that the work was too easy to be of service in strengthening Mede's muscles.

The boy was in excellent form at the time of his purchase and there was little that could be done to improve it. He responded to nutritious food of which he ate enormous amounts. Hammond believed that the rubs with serpent oil made the fighter flexible, lissome, and agile; and indeed the massage did produce a glow and a euphoria that convinced Mede of its benefit. He had become so inured to the odor of the lotion that it no longer either disgusted or stimulated him.

He lay down on the bed and submitted to Lucy's removal of his clothes and lolled voluptuously and drowsily while she anointed and stroked and pommeled his flesh. When she contorted him too violently and sought to bend his joints back upon themselves, Mede winced and sometimes grunted a remonstrance, but he surrendered to her to work her will, or rather their owner's will, upon him.

Massage was for Mede at once invigorating and soporific, which was in his case no contradiction, since he slept with a kind of gusto. So profound was his sleep that he wallowed in slumber, flung himself menacingly as he altered his position, heaved his breath, and on his back snored stertorously. Lucy at first thought that he was dying in agony but soon learned that what she took to be pain was but satisfied rest. When released from labor, Mede slept. He slept with the same fervor with which he ate or worked.

To Big Pearl's philandering, Mede was indifferent to the point of impatience. Her sexual demands were insatiable and he made no greater efforts to satisfy them than his own desires dictated. Upon her coquetry he went to sleep and Lucy forbade her to wake him up.

Lucy had no awareness of her relationship to Mede, and any prejudices

she might have harbored toward incest were inconsequential. She had considered the phenomenon neither pro nor con. But fifteen years older than her son, Lucy was still an ardent woman whose appetite for the lusty youth whetted upon the contact of his muscles beneath her hands. She restrained her lust for him, however, until the advance should come from him or until her master should specifically command the union, which she knew would not be long delayed; and she made no deliberate display of her charms nor urged them upon the boy.

Hammond rode by Lucy's cabin to make sure that his orders had been executed. He found Mede asleep crosswise of the bed and did not disturb him except to tell Lucy to cover him lest he get cold. "I aims to fight him come Satiday an' I doesn't want no col' to weaken him down," the master explained. "An' I wants you not to pester with him an' sap his stren'th afore then neither—you an' Big Pearl. Nev' mind whut he want, you an' her sleeps on the ground an' leave him the bedstead."

"Mede, he don' want nuffin an' I ain't never had him yet—on'y that Big Pearl won't leave him be. Me an' Belshazzar, we always sleeps on the groun'."

"Papa wantin' you should pleasure with that buck too, besides Big Pearl. Satiday night, an' he ain't too tuckered, you takes him you own self. Big Pearl had 'nough of him a'ready this month. Forced to snake her today; did she tell you?"

"You jist snake her all you craves to, Masta, suh: I 'on't care none. You snake her much as she merits. She gittin' biggety, you lettin' her take up an' all. Whut she do?"

"She drivin' Mede with a snake an' hurt him," Hammond answered. "I give her a couple to learn her how he feel."

"I'll trounce her tonight so as she won' fergit," threatened Lucy. "Was I you, I hang her up, hang her right up an' peel the hide offn her."

Hammond dismissed the subject. "Ain't needful, I reckon."

Lucy knew that her young master would be guided by his own judgment and not by hers; and she made her recommendation of violence not for the purpose of aggravating her daughter's punishment but of currying favor with her master by a seeming indifference to Big Pearl's fate.

"You wants I should trounce her, though? Doesn't you? Her a-snakin' your fightin' buck?"

"Ain't needful, I say," declared Ham with finality. The whims of masters were hard to grasp, especially their lenity. Lucy longed for power, and she shook her head over masters who, having power, failed to wreak their wraths.

CHAPTER 18

BY midweek Hammond had begun to have anxiety about the fight of the ensuing Saturday. Should he be able to arrange a match for his formidable buck? Would any man, seeing him, be willing to pit his Negro against him? And would Mede win his bout, even if one could be arranged? The owner was torn between knocking off the training and exhausting his man's fighting strength by continuing it.

The plowing went on, but Mede's work before the plow was discontinued as futile. Wednesday morning the elder Maxwell sat on the gallery in the sunshine to supervise Mede's running, jumping, and lifting exercises. The white man was petulant and drove the boy to increase of effort with a running fire of obscenities, taunts, threats, and imprecations. Mede could not know that they were without real rancor, but he did not fail to note that when Hammond rode up, as he did from time to time, the father fell silent. Mede tried to obey the old man's injunctions, with however much billingsgate they were uttered, but he tried even harder to conform to the rational and not unkind suggestions Ham made for the improvement of his training.

Wednesday afternoon the clouds gathered and so much rain fell that it was necessary to bring the plowmen in from the fields. It rained all night and the ground on Thursday was still too soggy for the plows. A warm drizzle continued through the morning and showed no indication of surcease. Hammond was nervous in his anxiety to finish his plowing and to continue Mede's exercise. As he swallowed toddies, which he didn't want, his misgivings about Mede grew; the ensuing fight ceased for him to be a mere matter of an effort to win a wager and took on a sporting aspect of personal triumph or defeat. The claims he had made for his boy had been deliberately modest, but he had been unable to silence Charles' boasting at the tavern, and he sensed a disgrace in gibes of the gentlemen if Mede should fail to best the slave against which he should be matched, and especially if he should fail of a creditable exhibition of strength and skill. The mere loss of the young slave he should wager assumed smaller proportions than the forfeit of his reputation as the proprietor of fine livestock.

But for the urgency to send Charles back to Crowfoot with the ring for Blanche and the money for her father and the youth's disappointment if he should fail to see the Mandingo fight at least once before his departure, Hammond would have been tempted to keep Mede at home on Saturday and to give him at least one more week of training before he should fight him. Charles was quiet and agreeable, caused no trouble to the Maxwells, but it was imperative that he be sent home.

Would Mede fight at all? No trial had been made of his skill in combat or of his courage. Hammond blushed as he envisioned the possibility that Mede

should retreat from a fight or worse still that he might accept defeat without fighting at all. He resolved to make a preliminary test.

None of the other slaves could be deemed a fair antagonist for Mede. Vulcan was at least as large, but Hammond reckoned him a coward. He would serve as a foil. Maxwell gave his tipsy assent to his son's proposal, and Charles was ardent.

Meg was dispatched to summon the gladiators to the front of the house. "Fetch along that lank, turkey egg, faded-eye, brique in the barn, when you come back too."

" 'Trides?" asked Meg.

"That him. The one with rusty wool," Hammond further identified the boy. "All right I use him fer bettin', ain't it, Papa? You know the one."

"He goin' to grow into a good han', Son, when he stop growin' up and start spreadin'. Seem a shame to bet him off."

"But he so ugly he make me puke up to see him. His face look like he dung-spattered an' his eyes like green scum."

"Look jest like his paw, a big Irisher that use to be a driver fer Anson. Bought him in a lot of five or six young 'uns at Anson's sale when he died. He right sound an' vig'ous."

"I tole Lew Gasaway I bring a good, sound nigger. Ain't no other kin' here."

"Jest bettin' him, ain't goin' to lose him, an' Mede win," interposed Charles with confidence.

Hammond glanced through the window and saw the slaves coming with Meg and started toward the door.

"Reckon I won't need no shawl," said Maxwell, glancing in indecision toward the blue coverlid, and at the same time declaring his intention to see the trial. "Whure my nigger; whure Mem?" he demanded.

Charles called Mem, who supported his master along the hall and out onto the gallery. He stood well back against the house to avoid the rain, and watched the two big Negroes remove their clothes and pile them beneath the tupelo tree to protect them somewhat from the drizzle. Vulcan was a massive bright mulatto, and except for an innate lethargy might have been a fair match for Mede.

"Don' leave him hurt me, Masta, suh. I ain't done nothin', suh. I's feared," Vulcan begged, scanning his opponent. "He awful big."

Hammond ignored him. "I craves you wrassles this boy. Hit him, hard as you kin, but don' kill him," he instructed Mede. "Don' bite nor gouge him. Wait till Sat'day fer that. But see an if you got bottom enough to lick him good."

Meg and Atrides stood at the end of the gallery; Lucretia Borgia came from the kitchen; Ellen and Jason watched from a window upstairs; and Big Pearl peeked around a corner of her cabin.

The fighting space had no demarcation, but was a mere open area in the

muddy ground beyond the tupelo.

Vulcan stood, arms hanging, paralyzed with fear, too terrified to run. Mede rushed him, striking him in the chest above the heart and grappling with him. Vulcan whimpered and raised his arms to push the fighter away but there was little effort in his resistance. Mede with doubled fist stung Vulc's face below the right eye, causing him to howl with pain but more with fear.

Vulc struck out without aim or intent and caught Mede in the groin. Mede grunted and sank down in the slippery mud, his facial muscles contorted in his pain. He made an effort to rise but got only to one knee when he began to vomit.

Maxwell chuckled, "Reckon Vulc saved 'Trides."

"You goin' to fight the yaller one Satiday, ain't you, Cousin Hammond? Fight the winner?" demanded Charles, not to be bilked of his fight. "He better anyway, anybody kin see."

Vulcan was more amazed at his triumph than any of the observers, but it was short-lived. Mede rose, pushed aside his master, who hovered solicitously over him, and, despite his pain, rushed toward Vulcan, embraced him and wrestled with him. Vulcan's wide base did not save him. He lost his footing and went down in the mud, Mede falling on top of him. In his renewed terror, he succeeded in reversing the positions, but only for a minute, for the two rolled over and over.

At length, Mede's pain blanketed in his fury, he by his superior strength pinned Vulc's shoulders to the ground, drew forward his knees to plant them in the other's belly, and alternated their impact while he pommeled Vulc violently in the face with his fists. Vulcan, while not unconscious, ceased to resist; he lay on his back and groaned, accepting the blows that the Mandingo rained on his body and head. He made efforts to kick but they were futile.

Hammond screamed unheard at Mede to desist. His kicks were unheeded. He reached down to grasp Mede's shoulder and received a glancing and undirected blow in the face. His commands were ignored, his strength went for naught. Just when Vulcan lost consciousness it was impossible to tell, since Mede continued his assault long after his opponent had relinquished all signs of life. Exhaustion finally forced him to desist. He rose slowly to his feet, his mouth in a grimace of disgust and hatred. He brushed his hands together in contempt and with his bare foot kicked the naked, mud encrusted body which he assumed to be a corpse.

"I done tol' you not to hurt him. Whyn't you listen? You gone and kill a best buck Papa got," said Hammond, convinced that Vulcan was dead. "I'd hang you up, savin' I goin' to fight you Satiday."

Charles exhaled, his first full breath since the combat had begun, and stepping close to Mede stroked his flank with such admiration as amounted to affection. "I'm bettin' on him a Sat'day," he said.

"That Vulcan could a brought fifteen, eighteen hundred," said the old man turning toward the door.

Lucretia Borgia, nodding toward the dead boy, asked practically, "Whut you craves I do with him, Masta, suh?"

Only Atrides beheld the spectacle with a detached and complete indifference. His imagination was not big enough to encompass triumph, pain, or death. He had been sent for; he had come; he waited.

Vulcan inhaled audibly and exhaled. Hammond saw his chest heave and took a step towards him, when Vulcan sat boldly upright. He propped himself with his left arm, brushed his right hand across his face, and struggled unsteadily to his feet. Mede lunged toward him as if to renew the attack, at which Vulcan cried, "Don' let him, Masta, suh. Save me!"

Hammond uttered a single low but stern word of caution. "Mede!" he said.

"I like to fight, Masta," Mede said. "I whip another one, if you want. Let me have that Pole, please, suh."

"That enough," said Hammond relieved. "Take Vulc down to the river an' wash the mud offn both of you. No more fightin' him; hear? Then come back an' let Lucy oil you down afore you gits stiffenin'." He turned to enter the house.

"Masta, whut you wants I do with that 'Trides?" asked Meg.

"I wants you to keep your britches on. That whut I wants." In his excitement and satisfaction, Hammond had in fact forgotten the freckled boy. He turned to Lucretia Borgia, "Give him his dinner. Then shuck him down an' wash him good an' clean. Let Memnon shave that red-like wool offn his haid. Mayhap he won' look so pucey, and put whole britches on him. I wants him fer Satiday."

"Yas, suh, Masta, suh," agreed Lucretia Borgia, grasping the boy roughly by the shoulder. She would have drawn him, stuffed him and roasted him for supper with as good a will if Hammond had but directed it.

No longer did Hammond doubt that Mede was capable of fury. He would fight—not skillfully perhaps, but at least with a volition which his present owner as well as his former owner had questioned.

From behind his preprandial toddy, the elder Maxwell nodded his head. "That sho' a vig'ous buck," he said with approval. "Only thing is, he need saltin'."

"Whut you mean, Cousin Warren, saltin'?"

"Why he need saltin'?" asked Hammond.

"Why, he paper hided. Skin like a sucker. Some of these bucks will rip him right open. You got to tan his hide an' toughen it up."

"How you mean?" simultaneously demanded the youths, somewhat disturbed by criticism of their champion.

"Brine him. Soak him in hot brine. Drag that hog-scaldin' kittle up here, build a fire under it and fill it with brine to float an egg. Gits hot, not to scald,

put the buck in an' let him soak couple, three hours, or more. Then take him out and dry the salt right on him. It sovereign fer paper hide. Toughen him right up."

"Weakenin' though?" suggested Hammond.

"Few days, yes, I reckon," admitted the older man. "I don't mean now, before Satiday. I means a week, two weeks, afore you wants the use of him."

"Monday," Hammond planned.

"Them ol' Romans knowed that," said Maxwell to reinforce his prescription. "They all salted their fightin' boys."

CHAPTER 19

THE white men hitched their horses and the Negroes their mules in front of Pearl's tavern, and Hammond looked in the door to survey the gathering, which was already sizeable despite the early hour. The weather was clearing but clouds still hung in the sky and intermittently drifted across the face of the sun. To plow was not feasible and planters were free to come into Benson to buy, to visit, to drink, and to watch the fights.

Hammond had to go to the jewelers to see about his ring and, afraid that some miscreant might tamper with his fighter, took his entourage along with him, leaving Mede and Atrides outside the shop while he and Charles entered. The bell on the door tinkled and the watchmaker laid aside his glass and rose from his bench.

The ring had arrived. It was a yellow, lusterless, rose-cut stone of some two carats in a severe solitaire setting. The watchmaker extracted it from its velvet-lined box and laid it on the top of his showcase with an exhibition of pride that concealed his inward misgiving. Hammond picked up the bauble, looked at it, and carried it to the glazed door for further inspection.

"Is that all?" he asked. What he had expected, he did not himself know, but at least something more gorgeous and spectacular than the ring proved to be.

"Right purty," advanced the salesman.

"Too purty fer her," said Charles impatiently. "Pay, an' let's go back to Pearl's. Them fights goin' to start."

"How much it cos'?" asked Hammond.

The jeweler replied, "Two hundred and thirty-five dollars, an' I'm not makin' much on it, I tells you, gittin' it here an' all."

"A heap of money," said Hammond, sighing and drawing forth a long leather pouch from which he slowly counted out gold coins. "You sure it solid, pure di'mon'?"

"I warrant you," affirmed the dealer.

"That whut she wantin'," said Ham with satisfaction. "Put that little box right in here among this money. Keep it safe."

"Let me know how the lady like that ring," said the jeweler as Hammond closed the door.

"Reckon you goin' home, come next week. Got to git this ring to Cousin Blanche an' that money to your papa," Hammond announced as they walked along the plank sidewalk toward Pearl's.

"Don' make me yet," Charles pleaded. "I likes Falconhurst better than Crowfoot. I likes you an' Cousin Warren better than Papa and Mamma, an' as fer Blanche."

"Don' talk so. It ain't nice," said Hammond.

"It a fact."

"Hadn't ought to say it. You kin come again—later, after your papa have that money."

"Blanche be here then. She pizen."

Hammond made no reply.

"I gits home, Papa goin' to tie me up an' whup me, whup me jest like I a nigger," Charles thought aloud. "Me, I too big to whup, ain't I, Cousin Ham? Don' you think?"

"Whut fer your papa whup you?" Hammond asked absently, his mind on the tavern.

"Runnin' away," the boy confessed. "He didn't give me no leave to foller you. I asted an' he tol' me no."

"You fib to me. I know you lie when you said it," Hammond accused his cousin.

"Whut fer you fetch me along, then?"

"I reckon I lonesome-like an' want ridin' company."

"You bad as me then, carryin' me away an' knowin' Papa never said."

"You say he said, though. You swear."

"That the on'y way I gits to come."

"You goin' right home, leavin' Monday. Cain't stay an' me a-knowin'."

"I git whupped. I sure git whupped," the youth lamented. "You sendin' me to git whupped."

"You needs it, even an' if you is big."

"Jest like a nigger. I ain't no nigger, an' he cain't whup me. I ain't a-goin' to let him."

They reached the tavern, now full of milling men and boys, the Negroes ranged along the wall, the adult white men at the bar, behind which Pearl dispensed drinks expertly and Holden, impressed into service, aided him awkwardly. Hammond stationed Mede and Atrides at the end of the line of slaves and told them to wait, cautioning Mede to watch out for the boy.

There were already seven fighting men, including Kyle's one-eyed Sweetness, six stripling boys for betting and a single yellow girl of eleven or twelve years, not pretty but full faced and plump. Hammond recognized Lew Gasaway's Cudjo, a tall, well-made, dark mulatto with the top of one ear missing, and knew that Gasaway was somewhere in the crowd. Cowering behind Cudjo was a black urchin, flat nosed and blubber lipped, which Ham rightly assumed to be the Star which Lew had proposed on the previous Saturday to bet against Maxwell's boy. Hammond took Star by the shoulder and pulled him unresistingly forward. Star rolled his eyes questioningly toward Cudjo, to whom the tavern and its rough examinations was an old story.

Hammond ran his hand appraisingly over the boy, felt through his clothes of his biceps and thigh, opened his mouth and ran his fingers along the sound teeth, pulled the lips apart to note the occlusion. Star was short but stout, straight limbed and well fleshed. Hammond guessed him to be of Hausa stock, possibly with one Ubangi parent. His flat, black features were more

pleasant to Hammond than Atrides' freckled and patched pinkness and his revolting gray eyes.

Charles stood behind Hammond and said, "Cain't tell nothin' till you shucks 'em down."

"Lew Gasaway warrant him soun'. Don' need no shuckin' down," said Hammond.

Elijah Gasaway, coming up, overheard the comment. "He soun' all right. The bes' young 'un on the plantation. I peel him an' you wants to finger him."

"Nev' mind. He do, an' Lew like mine. Whure at is Lew?"

"Over there, drinkin'. I'll fetch him."

It wasn't necessary. Lewis saw his friend and detached himself from his companions. "Fetch your buck?" he asked, coming up.

"That's him," said Hammond nodding toward Mede.

"Um um!" mumbled Lewis. "He right vig'ous." He ran his hand over Mede, more in admiration than in appraisement. "I don' know do I wants I should fight Cudjo agin him."

"He purty to see, but will he fight? Ain't never matched him," Ham said dubiously.

Charles sniffed his confidence.

"Reckon, Cudjo, you kin lick that big boy? Wants to tussel him?" Gasaway turned to his slave.

Cudjo scowled. "I kill him, Masta, an' you tells me. I kill him," he repeated.

"Your bettin' saplin' ain't nice though. Kind of ugly," Lewis objected. "Whut a matter with his haid? Scald haid?"

"He jest shaved down. Ain't sore. Good as yore squatty black boy," Hammond declared. "Don' want him for sleepin', does you? Better pit Cudjo agin that yallow buck of Major Watson's there an' git you that little fat slut," he taunted.

"Watson know better than trust his'n agin Cudjo," Gasaway scoffed. "Cudjo kill yourn too."

"I risk," said Hammond, establishing the match and extending his hand.

"Better tell Pearl," suggested Gasaway, "an' have a drink."

The other owners were negotiating their matches, examining their opponents' slaves and binding their bargains in corn whiskey. The onlookers circulated and made small bets, the stakes for which they entrusted to Pearl, and bought each other drinks. The smaller white boys skylarked and wrestled and made so much noise that Pearl, after calling to them half a dozen times for quiet, came from behind the counter and chased the more raucous, unless they were accompanied by spending fathers or elder brothers, from the crowded room.

"Git out, git clean out of the fuggin' place. Ain't goin' to stan' so damn much noise," he blustered, grabbing two of the boys by the shoulder and shoving them toward the door. "Ain't no fuggin' room fer gent'men to move."

"I Mista Alcorn's boy," explained one boy, "I wants to stay with my papa."

"All right, find him, but dry up your fuggin' clatter," warned Pearl.

"We wants to see the fights, suh, Masta Pearl; cain't we?" protested another urchin. "We won't make no noise."

"Go 'round the house and watch through the cracks in the fuggin' fence."

Pearl had scarcely resumed his place behind the bar when he saw the boys returning by ones and twos, but he was too busy to bother with evicting them again so long as they were reasonably quiet. The doubts he had expressed the previous week about a decline in the public's interest in the fighting of Negroes were resolved in this enthusiastic gathering, which was buying drinks freely. The coins piled up in the box beneath the counter that served him as a till.

The younger boys made bets of dimes and quarters and half dollars among themselves, as the matches continued to be made, but Pearl refused to hold stakes on these petty wagers, since no drinks were to be consumed at their settlement. Against the advice of Redfield, Charles placed a bet of ten dollars upon the boy which Asa Gore had matched against Kyle's Sweetness, and another of ten dollars and one of twenty-five upon Mede against Cudjo. Hammond made no money bets at all, being more concerned with Mede's showing than with monetary gains or losses.

Elijah Gasaway felt a tug of his coat and turned to an even younger boy whom he didn't know. The youth asked confidentially, "You know that freckled, skinny nigger you all fightin' fer, he ain't sound?"

"Ain't soun', why ain't he?" returned Elijah.

"He got three knockers!" said the boy.

"How you know?"

"I fingerin' aroun' down there, an' I felt 'em."

In a low voice Lije told Lewis, who called down the bar to Hammond, "Lije say that yaller saplin' ain't soun'. He got three balls. You know it?"

"How Lije know? Ain't even shucked him," Hammond replied. "No buck ain't got no three balls."

"That one have. I han'led 'em," declared the unknown youth.

Hammond refused to believe until he had called Atrides and pulled down his pants. "Damned, if he ain't!" he said in amazement. "How come I never noticed? I'll sen' you another, an' if you wins."

"Let me see," urged Redfield elbowing through the crowd that had gathered about the young slave. "Shore enough I never seen the like."

"I shore plagued," apologized Hammond.

"Ain't unsoundness no way," pontificated the veterinarian. "It jist extra. I seen it in a jackass oncet—out to old man Randall's, but never in no nigger."

The half tipsy men vied to handle the long-legged, young slave's genitals. The child broke into tears which passed unnoticed. The youth who had made the sensational discovery sought credit for it but was ignored.

"Had ought to be a shore stock getter," declared Alcorn.

"Randall's jack never missed—not oncet," Redfield said. "He was sure."

"Who goin' to put his wenches to that piebald varmint?" somebody asked rhetorically.

"He bring yeller suckers," said Alcorn.

"Yaller suckers apt to be puny. Sooner mine come black," said Wesley Smith.

Redfield drew Hammond aside and told him, "That three-cullioned, string-bean, springal worth a thousand dollars, mayhap twelve-fifty in New Orleans, right now, without no growin'. Make Gasaway take another, an' if your nigger lose his tussle."

"Ain't worth five hundred," said Hammond, "whuther he swing one nut or a dozen."

Redfield sniffed and explained, "Them sportin' gents in New Orleans likes freaks that they kin show around, and they don't count money. Freaks bring them luck at the tables when they plays brag and blackjack. A little servant with three cullions—them gamblers will bid fer him till they busted."

The excitement about the boy's abnormality subsided, and his master told him to pull up his pants. Aside from his embarrassment at having represented the slave as sound, which was questionable, Hammond was more interested in the outcome of Mede's first professional fight.

Three more gentlemen had arrived with their fighters and there were to be four bouts, leaving one owner disappointed at his failure to arrange a match for his boy. The bets were all placed and the gentlemen had drunk all the whiskey they wanted. Pearl led the way to his back yard enclosure and called for the first fight, which was to be between Sweetness and Gore's large, muscular, concave-faced black called Mose. Four or five men and two or three boys remained in the room while the owners stripped their fighters and gave them their instructions.

Holden remained behind the bar, and each owner bought a cup of whiskey for his fighter; but, since there was only one cup for Negroes to drink from, one fighter had to wait while the other drank. Sweetness pleaded for a second cup and Kyle bought it for him.

Coming from behind the counter, Holden slapped Sweetness' rump and said, "I dunno. Good buck afore that eye lost, an' I still bets on him."

"Sees good out the othern. Don' hurt him none," agreed the owner.

"You knows, Mose, whut I tell you, an' you don' fight good," Asa Gore warned his boy. "You lose this fight an' I goin' to do to you jist whut I say I would. I don' care an' it spile you till you kin never fight agin. Jes' keep in mind."

"Yas, suh, Masta. You won't—" and the slave thought better of what he was going to say.

Kyle, on the other hand, promised, rather than threatened Sweetness. "You win this fight, Sweetness, I buy you all the corn you kin hol'—all you

kin guzzle. Hear? An' come tomorrow I give you a pass to go to Roselawn Plantation to pay visit to your offspring an' pester your broad wife agin. Maybe I buy her fer you or one of your chillun, ol' Judge Bascomb don' ast too high. How that?"

"I goin' to whup this other nigger, Masta, suh. Shore is. We carry both them little niggers home with us," Sweetness gave assurance.

Pearl cleared an open space in the rough ground of the back yard as the two owners leading their naked slaves came out the door, followed by the persons who had remained to see the boys stripped. Holden followed last and remained in the doorway, since it was necessary that a white man stay behind to keep an eye upon the remaining Negroes.

The impatient and anxious crowd stood two deep around the area that served as an ill-defined ring, upon opposite sides of which the fighters took their places, each escorted by his owner. Pearl stood in the center of the ring, his arm raised over his head.

"Now, ev'body stan' back, please suh, an' keep the god damn ring open to give the fuggin' varmints room to FIGHT!" Pearl dropped his arm dramatically at his final emphatic word and stepped to the side lines. The owners gave their respective fighters a shove toward each other and retired.

The boys advanced cautiously, muttering epithets. Each was patently afraid of the other, and alternately pursued each other around the ring without striking a blow. The bout promised to be tame and the crowd was displeased, disgusted.

"I got a nigger kin whup 'em both together," said one man.

"Ifn he kin ketch 'em," added his neighbor.

"Better take 'em out an' snake the two of 'em," suggested Alcorn. "Put some grit in 'em."

"Put a hot iron to they ass," said somebody else.

"They ain't gittin' hurt none, is they, Papa?" the Alcorn boy asked solicitously, and everybody laughed.

The fighters continued to dance and threaten.

Lije Gasaway turned his head over his shoulder to ask Charles Woodford, "Whuch you bettin'?" Without waiting for the answer, his attention returned to the fight, for he heard the impact of a blow although he failed to see it. Mose had caught Sweetness fairly on the socket of his missing eye and rocked him on his heels. A fat-legged boy who sat tailor-fashion on the ground giggled in fear. Mose followed his blow with a lighter one to the ribs.

Sweetness was knocked a step backward into the spectators, one of whom, angered by the indignity of being hit by the Negro, shoved him with considerable force back into the open ring and against Mose, who encircled Sweetness' neck, and the two fell together, Sweetness on his back. But not for long. Sweetness, without striking a blow, with a mighty lunge, exchanged positions and was on top. Here he was enabled to raise his arms and attain

leverage for a blow to Mose's skull, upon which he unknowingly skinned his bare knuckles. Mose's arms were pinned between the two bodies; Sweetness' arms were free and he rained unimpeded blows on the other's jaws and face. Blood spurted from Mose's nose and the flesh beneath his right eye began to swell.

Mose extracted his arms and the two lay still, locked in an embrace. Mose strove to force Sweetness upon his back, or even on his side, but could do nothing. He succeeded in entwining his legs in the legs of his opponent. The intensity of the struggle did not betray itself in the action and the gallery was not aware of it.

Alcorn, who stood close to the fighters with his hands on the shoulders of his son in front of him, spat tobacco at the Negroes, but was chagrined at missing his target. "Let's go have a drink while they huggin' up, an' come back when they aims to fight," he voiced his contempt of the indecisive and inactive bout.

Sweetness disengaged himself and rose to his knees, and Mose kicked him with his heel directly in the nose, at which the blood spurted but the victim seemed insensitive. He was able to get to his feet and planted a double punch in Mose's lower abdomen, before the two united in another clinch and, after staggering to the other side of the ring, fell together to the ground and rolled over twice. A stone dislodged from the ground, ripped Sweetness' thigh, which bled unheeded, the blood mingling with the sweat that bathed him. The audience, which had been restless, grew intense in its interest. "Come on, Mose; kill the one-eye baboon," breathed Charles to himself.

"Hurry up an' burke him, Sweetness, an' you wants that corn," yelled Kyle, and his Negro appeared to hear, for his punches to Mose's belly seemed more brutal than the ones before. Mose flinched. The inconclusive combat went on with an intermittent exchange of blows of which those of Sweetness seemed the more telling.

The exhausted fighters by mutual consent paused and parted for a deep inhalation, and resumed their struggle. They went down and rolled over and over, but neither had a firm grip on the other. The fight had lasted a long thirty-five minutes, and nobody could see how nor why the fighters had maneuvered themselves to lie end to end. Mose had Sweetness' big toe in his mouth and was biting it, while Sweetness tried unsuccessfully to kick himself loose. Sweetness gritted his teeth in his pain, but he succeeded in reaching between Mose's legs and twisted his scrotum. Mose's mouth opened and let go of the toe as he screamed in his agony. He screamed once, twice, thrice, each time louder, but Sweetness twisted only the tighter, and Mose fell silent and his torment vanished in unconsciousness. Sweetness did not relinquish his hold until the owners entered the ring and Gore conceded the victory to Kyle.

"Fuggin' black ape," Charles muttered to Hammond. "I could whup that one-eye buck my own self."

"Could, an' you had a blacksnake," said the urchin with the big legs, rising to his feet.

The crowd was silent for a moment and then fell into a murmur of excited comment as all went toward the bar, where winning and losing owner each bought a round of drinks for everybody. Kyle kept his promise of a large cup of whiskey for the limping Sweetness, while Gore, cursing the while, scrawled a bill of sale of the young slave he had lost on the match.

Mose staggered to his feet after everybody else had gone inside, and when he entered walking with legs spread and knees bent, Gore reminded him, "You knows whut I goin' to do to you, losin' that Sam saplin' on you."

"Naw, suh, Masta, please. Don' do it, don' do that. Naw suh, suh. Jest tear me down. Please, Masta; that enough. Jest the snake, please, Masta, suh," Mose begged.

"Dry up, an' begone over amongst the other niggers," his owner dismissed him.

"Don' merit the snake," said Lewis Gasaway. "He fit good. Couldn't help that grip ol' Sweetness got on him."

"Ain't goin' to snake him," denied Gore. "Snake ain't good enough."

"Whut you do?" asked Charles.

"You wants to see, come out to Greenoak tomorrow mornin'. The Sabbath don' count. An' you want to listen at a nigger yelp—."

While Pearl was paying the bets and the winners were buying drinks for the losers and sundry friends, Kyle retired to examine the young mulatto he had won. He felt of the boy with satisfaction and transferred him to sit beside his other young slave in Sweetness' charge. "Take care of him, Sweetness. Don' leave him cry. You goin' to Roselawn in the mornin'," he promised.

The crowd returned to the back yard for the following bout, which was a tame but amusing event. At Pearl's behest to "Fight," one of the fighters began backing away from the other, whose courage was stimulated by the other's retreat.

"Don' you hit me, nigger; don' hit me, or I kills you. I kills you," pouted the reluctant fighter as he walked backward.

The other lunged at him once but did not reach within a foot of his opponent. They had circled the arena for the fourth time without a blow from either, when the retreating boy, with a howl of horror, forced his way through the spectators, pursued by the second, and scaled the six foot fence.

The owner, in his mortification, proposed to mount his horse and overtake the runaway, but Pearl declared it a contest and the bets upon the renegade forfeit. The loser protested the dicision without redress, and reluctantly bought a round of drinks and scribbled the bill of sale for his sapling. Redfield assured him of the fairness of Pearl's verdict, and he felt better about his loss, but caught up the clothes the Negro had shed, set out to catch him, and failed to return.

"The nex' set-to," announced Pearl, "goin' to be between Mista Gasaway

and Mista Hammond Maxwell. Mista Ham got a new buck which none of us ain't seen tussle, and this fight goin' to be right in'erestin'."

The crowd for the third time began moving out into the yard. Elijah Gasaway hovered futilely behind Lewis, who was stripping Cudjo, and, in the same fashion and just as uselessly, Charles offered his moral support to Hammond, who watched Mede undress himself, Holden remained behind the counter to pour out the cup of whiskey with which owners were wont to fortify their fighters' courage.

Cudjo, out of his clothes first, took the cup which Lewis received from Holden and downed it with two gulps, afterwards wiping his lips with the back of his hand.

"Whut species of nigger is that?" Lewis demanded. "His musk powerful pungent; smell like he rottin' to pieces. Whyn't you wash him?"

Hammond laughed as he reached for the cup that Holden had refilled. "That ain't the buck. That is serpent oil he rubbed with."

Mede sipped the whiskey, which caused him to cough. "Do I have to drink this, Masta, suh?" he asked. "It will make me sick."

"Give here," said Hammond.

"Better pour it down him," cautioned Charles. "A nigger won't fight, lesten he drunken."

Hammond set the cup on the bar, but, lest the contents be wasted, Gasaway picked it up and gave Cudjo a second drink.

More to reassure Atrides that he was not being deserted than because of any concern for the garments, Hammond kicked Mede's discarded clothes toward the yellow boy and cautioned him, "Watch out fer these. Set still an' we come back."

Holden leaned his elbows on the counter and surveyed Mede critically. "That nigger bigger withouten no clothes than in 'em. He bulge out all over."

"Wait till Cudjo waller with him," Lewis replied. "Cudjo wallop them bulges right offn him."

Redfield tarried at the door to be at Hammond's service if he should be needed but not to make his partisanship apparent. When he saw that the Negroes were ready and that the owners were about to escort them out-of-doors, he joined the crowd about the arena.

Hammond, with Mede, followed by Charles, went first, Lewis and Elijah, with Cudjo, stayed ten feet behind them, since Cudjo could not be trusted not to attack his opponent before the fight was announced. Hammond circled the crowd and with his hand on Mede's shoulder, entered the ring at its furthest side while Lewis and Cudjo parted the bystanders and went into the arena at the point closest to the door.

Pearl moved around the circle imploring the onlookers to stand back and make room for the fighters, which they did while Pearl passed but immediately afterward crowded forward again. The area was ample, but Pearl embraced this means to assert his ownership and authority. He stepped to the center,

raising his arm, and proclaimed, "We all knows this big fuggin' varmint of Mista Gasaway's, name of Cudjo. The othern, Mista Maxwell's—Whut you call him, Ham?"

"Ganymede," replied Hammond and, when everybody laughed, added, "Mede, fer shortenin'."

"The othern," Pearl repeated, "Mista Maxwell's Mede. Let 'em fight."

Hammond stepped back to join Charles on the edge of the crowd. Mede looked around as if bewildered, braced himself, but made no move. Cudjo, encouraged by Mede's uncertainty, advanced aggressively, one hand in front of him to protect himself, and the other drawn back with fist clenched. Mede waited. Cudjo's first blow was at Mede's belly and Mede accepted it; but before Cudjo could withdraw his arm, Mede had clamped him by the wrist. He spun the other boy around and grasped the other arm, bringing both behind Cudjo, who was impotent to strike. Cudjo sought to trip Mede with his foot, but Mede elevated the other's arms at his back, throwing his body forward and forcing him to tiptoe to avoid the pain. Cudjo could neither escape nor resist. Nobody held a watch on the bout, but it seemed to the spectators that it had not lasted twenty seconds. Except Cudjo's tentative jab at Mede's middle, no blow had been struck and neither man was injured.

"What you want I should do with him, Masta, suh?" asked Mede, forcing Cudjo on his toes toward Hammond.

"Hol' on to him till Mista Gasaway give up," Hammond warily instructed his boy; and called across the ring, "Whut you wants, Lew?"

"On'y don't let your nigger kill him," returned Gasaway, laughing in embarrassment of defeat, and stepping forward to rescue his slave from Mede's grip.

"Hell of a fight," said Alcorn. Charles slapped his leg and doubled up with glee.

"Ain't hardly fair, don' seem like," said Hammond magnanimously. "Put 'em back an' fight 'em agin, an' if you says."

Redfield wouldn't hear of it. "Fair fight, an' fair win," he declared. "Bes' buck beat."

Pearl, although the short fight would sell little whiskey, was aware of the difficulty of settling the bets if it should be renewed to a reversal of the outcome. "No, no," he said, "Mista Maxwell won clean." He also forsaw the rematch of the same bucks on another Saturday.

There was some dissent among the disappointed spectators, and a few men who had lost their bets were disgruntled, but the consensus was that Mede's victory was clean cut and decisive. Gasaway, in his role as a sporting man, had no alternative but to accept it. He made a show of good nature as he bought his round of drinks for the crowd, and even condoned Cudjo's bad performance.

Cudjo wept as he pulled on his clothes and his master carried a cup of whiskey to him, and reassured him, "It all right, 'cept losin' that Star; but,

never mind, we win him back nex' time. Don' cry. You'll git 'nother go at him." Cudjo wiped his tears away with the tail of his shirt, and gradually recovered from his humiliation.

Hammond followed Lewis' treat with another round of drinks of which everybody partook, except of course the slaves. He was about to lift his glass when he felt a hand on his shoulder. He turned and saw Alcorn, who beckoned him to the edge of the crowd about the bar. Hammond laid a gold coin upon the bar to pay for the drinks, telling Charles to take the change.

Alcorn was confidential. "Crave to sell that tall, little buck?" he asked in a low voice. "Bein' unsoun' don't make no difference. My boy craves him fer a play boy, an' I aims to happify him."

Hammond was noncommittal, suspicious of Alcorn's means and motives. He shook his head.

"You don' rates him high, you bettin' him; an I'll give you two hunert dollars, two hunert hard cash. I'll loan it from Pearl there; he'll give it; I'm good fer it. Two hunert, an' jist fer to be play boy fer Clarence there."

The offer was refused with a tone of finality, at which Alcorn feigned offense.

The second and third fights had been tame if amusing affairs, and the drinking after them had not been so brisk as followed a long and tensely contested bout such as the first one. Pearl knew that the assembly was likely to disperse as soon as the fourth fight was finished, regardless of its duration, ferocity, or outcome.

In fact, Hammond did not plan to wait for the fourth fight. He had himself drunk more whiskey than he wanted, and believed that Charles had drunk quite enough. "Come on, Charles," he said. "Let's us gether up our niggers an' straddle them hosses. Our supper be cold now, with three niggers on one mule slowin' us down."

"Cain't go. I got a bet on that bright yaller," Charles replied. "Got to wait fer other fight."

"When it goin' to start?" Hammond asked Pearl, who saw that he should be unable to hold his crowd longer.

"Right now, this fuggin minute," Pearl replied.

The crowd again retired to the back yard. The owners stripped their Negroes, gave each of them a cup of whiskey, and propelled them toward the arena. The sun was declining and the naked fighters shivered while they waited for Pearl's superfluous announcement that there would be more fights on the following Saturday, after which he named the owners of the present contenders.

It was a routine and unexciting fracas, an exchange of blows in which one of the fighters was knocked down, followed by a scramble on the ground. Major Watson's man bit off the lobe of his opponent's ear and knocked loose two of his teeth; but, at the cost of a broken hand, was declared the winner after some thirteen minutes of combat. The spectators conceded that both

boys were game, but the match was even more unspectacular than the bout in which one of the entrants had made his escape and the one in which Mede had so handily tied Cudjo up. Both these had contained elements of surprise.

Major Watson was enabled to retain his young wench, but the stripling buck he won hardly compensated him for the broken hand of his fighter, which Redfield set and bandaged. Charles lost his ten dollar wager, which left his winnings for the day at only fifteen dollars, most of which he had spent over the bar. Pearl had not calculated his receipts, but the day had been profitable.

After the fight, Hammond did not return to the bar but instead went to rouse his menage for their departure. The Gasaway boys joined him with a show of amiability and Lewis, as well as he was able, explained his new ownership to the uncomprehending Star and coutioned him to obey his new master.

Elijah accompanied Charles out-of-doors and watched as Mede mounted the gray mule and took Star up in front of him with Atrides behind. Hammond overheard the mention of Monday in a whispered colloquy between Charles and Elijah and wondered what they were cooking up for that day. He was not concerned, however, since he had determined to send Charles home for the joint purposes of utilizing him as messenger and of punishing him for lying about his father's permission for him to come to Falconhurst.

As they rode along, Charles was jubilant in a review of the events of the afternoon. His winnings were small, but he congratulated himself that he had won at all. Mede's victory over Cudjo was in truth Hammond's over Lewis Gasaway and his own over Elijah, for whom he felt a strong rivalry and attachment. As they neared Falconhurst, Charles tentatively confessed that he had invited Elijah to ride with him for a visit at Crowfoot, and the acceptance was provisioned upon Elijah's obtaining permission to make the trip.

"Papa ain't goin' to thresh me," Charles projected, "an' I got me a visitor. He ain't that cruel."

"Your papa won't whup you, an' you fetch him home that money," Ham declared. He suspected Elijah's intention to run away and, if he had learned earlier of the trip, would have mentioned it to the elder brother. He decided not to interfere.

They found the senior Maxwell nervous. He had tried to pace the floor but the pain in his joints forbade such activity, and he had had Memnon move his rocking chair to the window that he might watch for his son's return. He sought to disguise his apprehension, and watched the boys and their Negroes dismount without moving from his chair. When he saw the third Negro crawl from the mule, he knew that Mede had won his fight. Less concerned about the value of the trophy than about his son's triumph and especially about his safe return, he resigned himself to drinking his toddy and had just upturned

the last of it when Hammond entered the room. Saturdays at the tavern, he knew, were rowdy and might be dangerous; Charles would be of little worth if Hammond should be drawn into a brawl.

"We brung you another nigger, a right likely young buck," announced Hammond, kissing the old man, who maintained a jealous grip upon his hand.

"I knowed that Mandingo goin' to fight vig'ous. They didn't gouge him or injure him?"

Hammond described the ease with which Mede had won, but admitted his doubt of the Mandingo's worth. Victory had been too facile and too fast. The fight had been no test of the boy's strength or his gameness.

"Cain't content you. Whut you crave, to fetch your nigger home in a washin' tub?" the older man laughed. "Bring in ol' Gasaway's nigger buck, let's see the stamp he breeds."

"It jist another nigger, but it sound. It black and musky like a polecat. Better wait until mornin' and see it outdoors."

"I have smelled niggers so long, they musk is attar to my nose. Carry him here an' we'll drink a toddy before supper."

"Don' crave no corn, comin' from the tavern. Reckon Cousin Charles don' neither."

Charles said that he wanted a drink, and Hammond went to the door to call Mede, whom he had instructed to feed and bed the boys, and told him to bring them into the house. Meg had brought the toddies, too hot to drink, when the youths arrived via the kitchen and dining room.

"Meg, help shuck him," Hammond commanded.

Meg rolled his eyes in protest, but obeyed. He did not relish contact with dung-hill blacks. "It stink," he murmured, half under his breath.

Star hung his head and backed away. Hammond placed his hand on the bashful boy's shoulder and propelled him toward his father's chair.

"I don't crave fingerin' it. All I needs is to look at a nigger," Maxwell protested and took a sip of his toddy. "Guinea, looks like."

"I reckon Hausa—part," suggested Ham.

"Mayhap mixed. No human blood anyways," declared the father. "Prime, too. I didn't reckon Gasaway fed that good. 'Bout thirteen—like, I'd say."

"Lewis say twelve," said Hammond, who had not seen the boy naked before. "An' not a whup mark or a pimple."

"Gasaway don't whup much. Say that fer him; don' whup, an' feeds, seems like."

"Does youens whup?" the child got up courage to inquire.

"I whups a nigger that don' say, 'Masta'," Hammond prompted him.

"Masta, suh," the boy corrected his manners.

"Nev' mind, an' you good; but hangs you up an' you bad," Hammond answered the question. "Tell yo' mammy to feed him good, all he wants to eat, an' bed him down with 'Trides," he told Meg.

"This other one? I don't need to look at it. I seen it a'ready," Maxwell glanced at Atrides.

"But you ain't fingered him," laughed Hammond, lowering Atrides' pants. "Somethin' you passed over, seem like."

The boy had begun to take pride in his abnormality, of which he had previously been unaware. It was his only claim to conspicuity and, after he had got used to having jokes made about him, which he failed to understand, he enjoyed the wonderment he engendered in his white betters.

"I swan, I never see the like. Three on 'em," and his father looked at Hammond as if he expected an explanation of the phenomenon. "I've see 'em with on'y one and without none at all, but I never seen three."

"Doc Redfield say he fetch good money in New Orleans."

"Don' ruin him, I reckon; but they don' help none either. Two all I ever need," boasted Maxwell.

"Doc Redfield say he lucky and some sportin', gamblin' gen'leman goin' to pay big fer it."

"An' he already lucky 'nough to have the money," said Maxwell doubtfully, rising at the sound of the supper bell and emptying his glass. "Feed him an' prime him to take along in your coffle, but look out fer the gam'lers. They ontrusty."

CHAPTER 20

BY Monday the soil had dried until it was plowable, and Hammond was early in the saddle, making the rounds from plowman to plowman. He had told Mede and Big Pearl to move the hog-scalding cauldron from its place behind the barn to another nearer the house where his father could oversee the salting of Mede, after which they should dig a fire-pit under it to heat the water with which it should be filled. He returned later to find the water boiling, ordered the fire to be drenched and cold water added to the hot to reduce the temperature, after which he put in as much salt as would dissolve.

It was his intention to follow the formula his father had laid down for toughening Mede's skin, but he knew Maxwell's propensity for thoroughness of whatever he undertook and did not trust him not to scald the slave. He made provision that water should be heated in the kitchen fireplace, however, with which Big Pearl was to add to the solution in the cauldron to prevent its cooling. It was a tremendous iron kettle on a trivet and without a bail.

Memnon moved the elder Maxwell's rocking chair out upon the gallery, wrapped the blue shawl around his shoulders, and Meg brought him a toddy. Alph sat on the edge of the porch with no duties. Maxwell had got used to having the yellow boy in attendance on him, but seldom gave him an order or a word. He served as a kind of silent shadow.

When all was ready, Hammond commanded Mede to remove his clothes and to climb into the kettle, explaining to him briefly the purpose of the ordeal. Steam rose in the chilly air, and Mede sloshed his arm in the brine.

"It's hot, Masta, suh," he objected.

Hammond stuck his hand in the kettle and said, "It soon cool down. Not too hot now."

"Got to be hot an' it toughen him up," warned Maxwell from his chair.

The slave took a long, doubtful breath, raised his leg, plunged the calf into the brine and withdrew it. "I cain't stand it. It hurts me, Masta, suh."

"Git in the vat, I tells you, an' scrunge yourself down to the neck." Hammond was peremptory.

Mede stepped into the cauldron, rubbed his buttocks and very gradually sank into the water.

"Show he needin' it," said Maxwell. "Cain't stan' a little warm brine."

Mede had doubled himself up to enable him to immerse himself until only his head and the top of his knees were out of the solution. "It's awful hot," he complained. "How long I got to stay here?"

"Till I comes back an' tells you you kin git out," answered Hammond. "Have Big Pearl keep it hot," he told his father, and rode away.

Maxwell dozed in his chair and occasionally awoke to glance at the bather. There was nothing for him to do.

"Time Cousin Charles was gittin' started an' he goin' today," said Ham-

mond on his return from his rounds. "His hoss waitin' an' saddled."

He got off his horse and went into the house, and when he returned Charles was with him.

"Has I got to go today?" Charles asked. "Don' know kin I fin' my way. Cain't I wait an' ride with Cousin Hammond? Ain't more than a month off."

"I wants your papa to git that money, an', don' let me fergit the ring fer Cousin Blanche," said Hammond. "Besides, your papa don' know whure you at. Git ready."

Argument was useless. Charles went into the house, and up to his room, but soon returned ready for his trip. A boy brought his horse and Maxwell arose and hobbled over to make sure its leg was completely healed. Charles shook the hands of his hosts in silence and, after he had got on his horse, Hammond handed up to him a cloth bag of gold coins.

"Take care of this," Hammond admonished. "It got that ring in it fer Blanche, right on top that money."

"I goin' to hug it right to me," Charles promised.

He rode away reluctantly, turning now and again to look back.

Hammond felt of Mede's bath and prescribed the addition of hot water. He then returned again to the fields.

As Charles turned from the lane into the road, he saw a chaise, top down, behind a large sorrel gelding, turn into the lane toward Falconhurst. Driven by a large, black Negro, its passenger was a weazened man who ceremoniously lifted his beaver hat from locks flowing to his neck, in recognition of Charles' turning aside his horse to permit the vehicle to pass. Not knowing the polite personage, Charles was enough repelled by something about him to cause him to quicken his pace, but he went to the left toward Benson rather than to the right which was the more direct route toward Crowfoot.

The arrival of the chaise aroused Maxwell from his doze. He was compelled to look twice before he recognized the gnome who was slowly alighting from it. His hospitable greeting was cordial enough, but there was no enthusiasm in his voice, "Why," he said rising, "if it ain't Gideon Gasaway. Come in, come in, suh."

"Don't disturb you, Warren," the little man said. "I learn you're ailin'."

"Not too hearty," Maxwell admitted.

"Whut ails your nigger. Correctin' him?"

"No, no, jist a-saltin' him to toughen his skin. He all right. Come right in the house."

Before they had reached the sitting room, Gasaway had broached his errand. "I don't like to tell you, Warren, but I reckoned it was my duty," he began.

"Set down, set down," urged the host. "You was a-sayin'—"

"The facts is that your boy is hangin' around that tavern in Benson, a-gamblin' an' fightin' niggers. I believed you had ought to know."

"I quite obliged to you, suh," Maxwell replied with a hint of irony. "Quite

obliged. On'y Hammond ain't in Benson. He out in the field workin', plowin' mules an' niggers, tryin' to plant a crop."

"I don't mean today. I mean Satiday. He was there Satiday," Gasaway changed his tense.

"Oh, Sat'day. That different. Yes, I hearn. He fetched home a right purty young buck he won from Lewis."

"I know Lewis and Elijah was in it too. I'm shamed of them, the Christian raisin' they had. I ain't excusin' them. But that buck, that Star, he is my wife's nigger, her favorite. He ain't Lewis' to sell nor to gamble off. I drove over to git him an' take him home. I knowed you'd understand."

Maxwell nodded his comprehension, and Gasaway brightened.

Meg appeared with steaming toddies, unordered.

Gasaway declined his drink with some show of disdain, "I never touch spirits—never touch 'em."

"Rheumatiz," said Maxwell. "Got to swallow 'em down fer my rheumatiz. Couldn't have a minute's peace."

"That different, of course. Fer medicine, but better to suffer."

"Reckon you drunk so much hereto that you don't need none now."

"Not sence I was saved—that is sence I was saved the second time—not a drop. I still saved. When I tempted, I think of Jesus, an' the devil of drink gits right behind me."

"Set it down, Meg. I drinks both on 'em. This nigger boy keep me well tempted," said Maxwell, and Meg put his hand over his mouth to stifle an embarrassed giggle at his master's notice of him.

"That Star," said Gasaway, "comin' back to him—"

"Yes, I un'erstan'. He stole."

"Well, not exactly. But Lewis sneaked him off without my leave. He my wife's nigger."

"So you say, so you say," posited Maxwell. "But my Hammond ain't no fool. He got a bill of sale with your boy's signin'."

"Lewis didn't have no right."

"So it seem, so it seem. Course, ifn the nigger is yourn, Mista Gasaway, I ain't go' to put nothin' in the way of you takin' it along with you. Nothin'. But how old is Lewis? He twenty-one, ain't he?"

"Twenty-two or three, about."

"But he is 'sponsible? Then I reckon he a nigger stealer an' Ham better ride in to see the sheriff."

"No, no, I wouldn't have that, of course. It jest boy's doin', an' I know you won't keep my nigger, knowin' and all how Miz Gasaway feels."

"Ham's doin'. His nigger. Have to talk to him when he ride up," Maxwell dismissed the subject. "He give back the buck, I warrant, but not the bill of sale. That goin' into court."

"Thought you be generous—seein' you got a boy of your own, Warren."

"My boy don't steal niggers."

The little old man searched in his pocket for a small cambric handkerchief with which he wiped a tear from his eye. "I swan, Warren, I don't know whut I'm goin' to do," he said. "The dirt niggered out on my plantation, my hands all old and stopped breedin', three wives all dead an' laid away, the fourth one ailin' an' sick, my boys lazy and triflin'. I don't know whut to do. I been hopin' the Lord would come an' take me before my place and my servants go under the hammer. Now, you-all got my bes' young buck."

That a white man should snivel! It disgusted Maxwell. He was embarrassed to find a reply.

"I s'pose the Lord is a-testin' me, like he done to Job," Gasaway continued. "But I won't cuss the day I was borned. I swan I won't. I'm Christian and I say 'His will be done.' "

"I ain't sayin' nothin' 'bout your wives an' your boys. That wouldn't be becomin'," but Maxwell implied the worst. "As fer your dirt, you sapped it makin' cotton an' sold the cotton, didn't you?"

"Reckon most of it washed away, jest washed away."

"An' you had ought to sell off niggers before they old and cain't neither breed nor work. After they git to be twenty-five a nigger worth less ever' day he live. I sells mine, most of 'em 'ceptin' extra choice breeders afore they twenty."

"That breaks up families. Don't relish breakin' family ties," Gasaway replied.

"Families! Niggers ain't families. I weans the young ones early, separates 'em from they dams an' bed 'em in the barn. Time comes to sell 'em off, the ol' ones don't carry on none; don't hardly remember which ones theirn."

"But husbands and wives?"

"Ain't no husband and no wife on Falconhurst," sneered Maxwell. "I 'signs 'em to take up like fer breedin', when I wants, but when I sells off the buck I gives the wench anothern. Always plenty young bucks on the place. An' I don't never sell off no sucker before it weaned. That all the wench care about, a buck to pester her an' sucker to milk her tits."

"Ain't Christian," protested Gasaway. "I aims to Christianize my servants. That why God given 'em to us, to Christianize 'em an' save their souls."

"Nigger souls!" scoffed Maxwell. "You reckon they got souls?"

"Course they got souls. Whut you reckon?"

"Air you goin' to fly about up there, a-flappin' your wings an' a-picking your harp amongst a lot of stinkin' black angels? I ain't. I ain't goin' an' if I got to sing in no choir with 'em."

"Well, I s'pose there will be a piece of heaven fenced off fer 'em, 'less they kindly serves an' waits on the whites. I don't know, maybe they turn white when they die and ascend."

"Even God cain't make a white man out of no nigger. It jest ain't in Him," Maxwell blasphemed.

"God kin an' He wants," Gasaway protested. "He kin do it. Laws knows enough white men tries it."

"Whut you mean?"

"A-ridin' their wenches an' bringin' yeller mongrel children. I never did it—leastwise never after I was full grown. An' I never let my boys do it. My niggers all thoroughbred black—mixed tribes of course—but no white blood, not a drop. Don't want no yeller wenches temptationin' my boys."

"Protects white ladies, an' saves them from submittin'," Maxwell justified the practice.

"White ladies don't never like it. One thing my wives, none of 'em, had to put up with."

"Of course, your wenches bein' solid black—"

"One of the things them abolitionists at the North accuse us of—yeller bastards. Cain't accuse me. That an' breakin' up families. Worst they got agin the institution."

"Long as they my property, I'll ride 'em an' sell 'em an' do as I likes with 'em, butcher 'em an' eat 'em an' I feels like it. Them abolitionists are a set of cranks an' loonies. Nobody pay attention to what they says."

"That Geriton, Garrison, whut's his name? He stirrin' things up right smart. Seen any of his writin'?"

"An' nobody better not send me none," said Maxwell. "Liberator! He better liberate them work hands at the North."

"He git on to this new fangled fightin' niggers, and, whut's worse, bettin' them, he make trouble certain."

"They been fightin' 'em in New Orleans, an' places, ever sence Ol' Hickory whup the British an' before—ever sence Rome, an' in Rome it was white humans," declared Maxwell.

"But in New Orleans it is under cover—not out whure ladies and preachers an' such hear about it, like in Benson. Somebody goin' to write to that Garrison, an' then—"

"An' somebody goin' to be tarred an' rid on a rail. No white man would an' no nigger kin."

Gasaway rose and picked up his high hat.

"You'll stay for dinner. Ready shortly, soon as Ham come," insisted Maxwell.

"No, no. I got to git along towards home. I hurried to git away an' didn't call family prayers this morning. Got to git home an' kneel down. Me neglectin' prayers hardened your heart agin me about that buck. I know it."

"I didn't even know you hadn't prayed. How could it?" Maxwell was naive. He got out of his chair to accompany his guest to the gallery.

"I waste a morning to come over to tell you about your boy an' my buck, an' you don' even care."

"Knowed it a'ready," said Maxwell, displeased at the coupling of the subjects.

"Well, I seen my duty," said the departing guest, doubtfully. "No hard feelin's?"

"Course, course," was Maxwell's ambiguous assurance.

"Come over, come over an' see me. Any time at all. Seems like you fergot the way to Long Grove Plantation."

"My rheumatiz keeps me pretty close," was Maxwell's excuse. The two men shook hands, Gasaway climbed into his chaise, and Maxwell returned to the sitting room for a toddy, which he needed.

Hammond had returned to the house as was his custom at approximately hourly intervals, had recognized the chaise, and, questioning Big Pearl and learning that the visitor was an old man, surmised his identity and his errand. He shirked the situation, considered it one that his father could better manage. He got along well with Lewis, entertained for him an honest liking if little respect; for Lewis' canting old sire, he had neither. He laughed to himself at the thought of Elijah's proposed flight with Charles and wondered whether he had indeed gone. They should be well on their way.

He hastened in his attention to Mede in order to get away before Gasaway should emerge from the house and to avoid greeting and leave-taking.

Hammond splashed his hand in the cauldron. "It jest right. See: I kin hol' my han' in it easy." He overlooked that Big Pearl was compensating the boy for the lashing her master had given her the previous Tuesday and for Mede's devotion to Lucy at his master's behest the night before. It was impossible to punish the master and she took her vengeance upon the man.

"Can't I get out just a little while, Masta, suh, and straighten out my joints?" Mede asked. "I want water, cold water, how bad I want water."

"Give him a swallow," Hammond ordered Big Pearl. "But you stay right in that bucket," he told the Mandingo. "You gits out in the air 'fore you toughen, we has to start all over."

He glanced toward the door of the house with a guilty sense of shirking his obligations of hospitality to his father's guest. As he rode back toward the fields, he glanced over his shoulder and hoped that Gasaway would never know that he had come to the house and was aware of his presence.

The plowmen were working steadily enough and required little supervision, but Hammond tarried until their nooning, watched them unhitch and feed their mules and oxen. He was tempted to share their meal, which Lucretia Borgia had sent, but realized that his partaking of their food with them would embarrass, even while it would please, the slaves. He liked an occasional meal of the coarse food provided for the slaves—the corn pone, fat meat and buttermilk—but he would have to go to the house afterwards to allay his father's anxiety about his failure to appear for dinner and determined that, since he must face Gasaway, it was as well before as after dinner. As he came belatedly in sight of the house, he was relieved to see that the chaise had gone. Big Pearl was feeding Mede, still crouched in the cauldron.

The dinner bell had already rung and father and son went immediately into the dining room. There was an invasion of flies and Alph was kept constantly busy with his peacock fan while Meg was torn between seeing to it that his master was adequately served and that the insects should not settle on his food.

Maxwell chuckled with satisfaction as he related his conversation with Gasaway and Gasaway's discomfiture at having Lewis accused of theft.

"Wouldn't like to call Lew no nigger stealer, hardly, bein' it from his own plantation," Hammond sought to defend his friend. "Wouldn't want to take it to the sheriff, nor ride him on a rail, nor nothin'."

"Course not," agreed his father. "But it right satisfyin' to make out to that lyin' old son-of-a-bitch, tryin' to sneak out from payin' his bet."

"Lewis' bet."

"Well. It all the same. Think an' you lost that pie-hided buck, I'd gallivant aroun' tryin' to beg him back?"

"But you proud, Papa," the son proclaimed his own pride in asserting.

"Don't never touch spirits, but drinks a big bottle ever' day of Mazda Invigorator. Ain't nothin' but corn juice bittered up."

"Cost more."

"Course, but Miz Gasaway think he takin' medicine. An' don't ride no yaller wenches," Maxwell sneered in his irony. "His first wife seen to that —whupped an' starved the yaller ones an' Gideon's bastards till he had to trade 'em off an' git blacks. Bet Lewis never had none exceptin' black tail."

"An' he have to go out to cabin to git that," said Hammond.

"Goin' under the hammer—likely! Ol' Gideon got more money buried around Long Grove than his trees got leaves. 'Tain't honestly hisn; belongs to them two boys of his second wife—her money bought Long Grove."

"He don' know Lije goin' home with Cousin Charles, I reckon."

"How, you say?"

"Yas, Lije goin' with Charles."

"A fitten pair, them two, with they scabby faces," Maxwell pushed his chair back from the table.

Lucretia Borgia planted herself in the doorway to the kitchen. "Masta, suh, I wants to 'form you, that saplin' of Masta Charles never turn up to git his dinner."

"Jason?" asked Hammond.

"Yas, suh; that the one. Whut I do?"

"Don't do nuthin'," said Hammond. "He come up fer supper."

"Prob'ly off a-mopin' 'bout its masta," surmised the older man. "Loony-like about Charles, but never come to see him ride away."

"Mayhap watchèd from upstairs. Upstairs now, cryin', I venture."

"Charles treat it good, too. Like it, seem like."

"I minded him to treat him good and not to never lambaste him."

"He lambaste him nights," Meg interposed.

Hammond at first looked sternly at the young slave to reprimand the interruption; then asked, "How you know?"

Meg was confused by the tacit injunction to silence and the spoken question. "Jason say," he shrugged. "He like it."

"Nigger talk."

The old man returned to the sitting room without assistance from Memnon, who walked watchfully at his side, and the son followed him.

"Time to take the Mandingo out of that salt?" Hammond asked.

The father looked at the clock and made some calculations on his fingers. "S'pose he steeped long enough. Set down an' rest you. Better give him a quarter more."

Hammond sat but his father saw that he was restless and admonished him. "Them plow hands don't need you. Would think you they wet nurse. Got to learn to let niggers alone. Jest so much work in one, an' no more. Don' want you should bust down a-drivin'."

The young man watched the clock and at the end of fifteen minutes he rose from his chair. He suspected the old man had prescribed the additional time for Mede's bath just to detain him to enjoy his company. He knew that his father was capable of such a ruse.

"Take him in the kitchen an' dry him front of the fire, so as he don' ketch cold. No rubbin'; leave the salt dry on. Then put him to bed, kivered," Maxwell detailed the correct procedure. "Make that big wench let him be while he sleep." He accompanied his son to the gallery and watched the Mandingo rise from his bath.

Mede had been doubled up in an uncomfortable position so long that his joints were stiff. Maxwell had never before salted a man so large nor had a cauldron to accommodate one handily. Mede squatted and rose, extended and contorted his skeleton, and flexed his muscles. He was relieved to get out of his kettle.

"I afeared he cooked," said Hammond, seeing the purple glow beneath the pigmented skin. "He boiled too long or too hot. He tendered, 'stead of toughened."

"Jest right. Jest enough," the elder man approved. "Two days he tougher than a 'gater hide."

Mede went into the kitchen and dried, turning one way and then another, before the fire. Crystals of salt formed on his skin and he brushed them off. The heat of the bath had made him sleepy but the languor, since he was free to lie down, was pleasant. The serpent oil and its stench had been washed away. Mede's skin, however, felt more pliable and thinner even than before his long immersion, but the boy was indifferent to its texture.

Maxwell entered the kitchen from across the passage to the dining room. He stood for a moment in admiration of the slave, after which he approached him and felt of his drying skin as if to appraise the efficacy of the bath. "Huh," he grunted without committing himself. "Better stir him a toddy," he told

Lucretia Borgia, "an' see that he blanket while he sleep."

Although Jason was still missing at supper time, Lucretia Borgia failed to report his absence since her masters had shown so little concern about it at noon. However, when he didn't show up for breakfast, she thought she had better mention it again.

"You reckon Charles take that buck along?" Hammond asked his father. "He crazy enough."

"You see him ride off. Course not."

"He mayhap send Jason ahead an' pick him up. He untrusty."

"You trust him with twenty-five hunert dollars gold. Reckon you trus' him with a little yaller buck."

"That different. Charles crazy 'bout Jason."

"Wouldn't care, savin' the buck was a present," said the father. "Never grow into nothin' noway."

"Charles got him, I fetch him when I go to Crowfoot nex' month. Don' mean no harm."

"Had ought to ast, anyways."

"Course. Course. I'd a let him carry him along until I goes."

"Mayhap you right. That whure he go."

"Hope so, an' he don' come up," Hammond dismissed the subject.

CHAPTER 21

THE week wore away and the plowing was finished, the fields ready for the planting. Saturday Hammond took Mede and Star and went again to Benson, where he received at the Post Office, besides the *New Orleans Weekly Advertiser,* an envelope addressed to Warren C. Maxwell, Esq., from C. Wertheimer of Mobile, enclosing bills of sale for Mede, Ellen and Jason signed by Wilson, and releases of their mortgages signed by Wertheimer. No letter was enclosed and the documents were all made in favor of the father. Hammond, knowing the integrity of Wilson, had not concerned himself until now about the title to the slaves which he had paid for and which he had in his possession. Such transfers were superfluous in transactions between gentlemen, but it was with an added admiration of old Mr. Wilson that Hammond shoved the papers into the pocket of his coat.

At the tavern, he found the usual excitement about fighting slaves, the same drinking and arranging of matches and wagering, mostly the same men. Kyle was present with Sweetness, whom he proposed to match against Mede, but the young buck he wished to bet against Star was ruptured and did not interest Hammond. In fact there were but two of the youths that Hammond would have taken home as gifts, one of which was already wagered, and the other, not so old as Star, only about ten, but muscular, alert and bright yellow. Hammond pulled the child into the center of the floor and examined him.

"Whose saplin' is you? Who yo' masta?" he inquired.

"I, hisn, a-comin'," replied the boy, pointing at a man of some sixty years, approaching in the tow of Redfield. The boy was unabashed and cooperative, happy at the attention the white man was giving him, anxious to make the most of his strength and appearance. He hopped about to exhibit his agility without prompting and inserted his fingers into his mouth to stretch his jaws and show his teeth. Examination, it was apparent, was no novelty to him and something of a pleasure.

"I reckoned you might cotton to that one," said Redfield. "Mista Hodkins here is jest passin' along with his fighter an' this yaller buck, but I reckon you wouldn' crave pittin' yo' Mandingo agin hisn. His too vig'ous."

"Mine vig'ous too," Hammond boasted. "I fights him an Mista Hodkins like."

"Ain't seen him yet," said Redfield.

"Armand, step here an' show yourself," Hodkins called, running his hand through his bushy gray beard. "Husk, peel down."

The big Negro came forward reluctantly and slowly removed his clothes, so slowly that the master grasped his shirt and pulled it from his back, and slapped his cheek smartingly.

"Please, suh, Masta," said the man. It was a formality, for the man was unafraid, stolid, and unmoved. The Negro was massive, dark brown in color,

indefinite as to tribe and with some admixture of white; it was impossible to know how much. Hammond estimated his height at something under nineteen hands and his age under thirty. His calves and thighs were heavy and muscular but his biceps appeared flabby and he carried just a hint of a paunch.

Hammond did not bother himself to assess the man carefully and did not lay his hands upon him. He was prepared to match Mede against any comer, not with complete confidence, but with a feeling that if he proved unable to stand up to any antagonist, it was better not to fight him at all. Redfield, in Hammond's behalf, was more circumspect. He went over the man as if he were about to purchase him, feeling him and prodding him. He caught Hammond's eye and nodded his approval of the match.

"Whup scars," he noted, rubbing the back vertically as if to erase them.

"Don't know whure he got 'em," said Hodkins. "Had 'em when I got him. I ain't ever so much as broke the skin on him with the snake. An' that brand above his rump—reckon somebody tried to burn an R—an' that nick out of his ear, he had them too. I don' know nothin' about them."

"Don' ruin him none," Redfield observed. "Learn him whut a kind owner is like."

"I'll chance him," declared Hammond, indifferent to the mutilations. "I'll chance him, an' Mista Hodkins willin'."

"Ain't seen yo' niggers yet," declared Hodkins.

Hammond called first Star and stripped him, then Mede.

The stranger ran his hands over Star, looked at his teeth and dismissed him with a spank on the rump at which the urchin grinned. "How ol'?" he asked.

"Don' rightly know fer certain." Hammond looked around at the men. "Lew Gasaway ain't come yet. He know."

"Warranted sound?" asked Hodkins.

"He soun'," said Redfield. "Look fer yourself."

"Falconhurst niggers all sound. Maxwell don't have no other kind," said a bystander to Alcorn.

Hodkins turned his attention to Mede who stood forth, naked, for the inspection. The old man brushed his hand through his beard and doubtfully nodded his acceptance of the engagement. The party adjourned to the bar where Hammond bought drinks for Hodkins and Redfield to seal the bargain, invited Kyle to join them and could not avoid asking Alcorn, who intruded himself into the treat.

"Whure you come from, Mr. Hodkins? Whure your home at?" asked Redfield.

The bearded man waved vaguely in a generally westward direction. "All over. Natchez, I reckon. Mostly Natchez. Borned over in Tennessee."

Hammond had no curiosity and Redfield thought it better not to press the inquiry further. Anyway, Pearl called the first bout and the spectators moved through the back door to the arena. Two evenly matched Negroes,

one tall and bronze, the other squat, muscular, and black, wrestled and pommeled each other unskillfully about the ring. There was no unwillingness of either, but many of the blows were wild or carried no force, and the onlookers were apathetic.

"That short son-of-a-bitch cain't reach that other'n," remarked Gore, in disgust. "An' I got ten dollars on him too."

"The lanky one kin reach, but he cain't hit," replied Holden.

The squat Negro just at that moment landed a blow to the other's right jaw which floored him, but he was up again before the shorter boy could fall on top of him. It was apparent, however, that he was tiring. He moved in and tried to trip the blacker boy, but was unable and for his trouble received another blow on the jaw, lost his balance and went down. The shorter Negro fell on top of him and the two wallowed and struggled on the ground. The bronze, exhausted, at length ceased to fight, just lay and with his arms warded as best he could the blows the other dealt. It seemed impossible to knock him out, but it was so evident that he was defeated that Hoke Stevens, his owner, told Pearl to stop the fight. Both boys were battered and the fleshy face of the black streamed blood, but he arose from the fray cocky and triumphant, and strutted into the tavern, disguising his fatigue.

Stevens helped his Negro to his feet, supported him into the tavern, and seated him on the floor. The audience drifted into the bar without show of enthusiasm and downed the drinks the victorious owner bought for everybody. The fight had been close but hardly spectacular, and, except for the persons who had laid bets, the white men were more interested in the drinks than in the outcome of the fight.

Hammond glanced now and again toward the door for the arrival of the Gasaways, Lewis anyway, but neither came. He speculated that their father might have forbidden them to come, or that Elijah might have gone with Charles to Crowfoot.

Pearl paid off the bets that had been entrusted to him, and stalled the second bout, which was to be between Mede and Armand, until he had sold all the whiskey the crowd was disposed to buy. Mede had resumed his clothes, and Hammond was grateful for Redfield's reassurance as they watched the Mandingo strip.

"That ol' man's buck ain't in no shape; he jest putty," whispered the veterinarian. "I fingered him."

"But he ol' fighter; scarred up," argued Hammond.

"Not scarred from fightin'; that from correction."

Neither owner offered whiskey to his fighter. There was little betting, since the big men seemed so evenly matched. The crowd drifted apathetically into the back yard and found places around the arena. A few tarried to inspect the stripped fighters and to offer their advice to the owners.

Hammond went out first and stationed Mede in the part of the ring furthest from the door and waited. No rules prevailed, except the dicta that

Pearl extemporized. Armand appeared, Hodkins at his elbow, offering advice and caution to the end. At Pearl's final word the owners removed their hands from the shoulders of their charges and retreated to the side lines.

Mede knew no caution and received a belt in his middle for his recklessness. It failed to stagger him but taught him wariness and he backed away, sparring for advantage. He warded another blow with his left hand, reached for and found Armand's nose with his right. The blood spurted, but neither fighter was badly hurt. Armand stepped back, with his hand flicked the blood streaming from his nose, and unexpectedly catapulted himself at his antagonist, clasping his waist and shoulder. Mede went down with Armand on top of him. The two lay still in rigid struggle. Mede extricated his right arm and brought a telling blow to Armand's temple, but it was impossible to know whether Armand's head rolled with the punch or whether it had been knocked aside by the impact. He caught Mede on the jaw with a long punch, but there was little power behind it. The scrimmage on the ground was slow, seemingly deliberate but in fact the strife of large bodies unable to move with the greater agility of smaller men.

The eyes of the gallery were upon the conflict which held their attention. Only Kyle saw Hodkins' hand go to his heart and heard him cry out before he collapsed on the ground, gave a few weird kicks as if he were dancing a jig in the air and settled dead on his back, his eyes open and rolled backward.

"This man dyin'. He dyin', I tells you," called Kyle. "Stop that fight."

The crowd diverted from the fight, gathered, confused and curious, around the man already dead. The two Negroes continued their struggle without an audience. If either was aware that they were not being watched, he did not betray it.

"Bring some whiskey, cain't you, god damn it," Kyle called hysterically.

"Open his collar. Stand back an' let him breath," commanded Gore.

"Who is he?" demanded a third.

"He own that big nigger a-fightin'."

"Which one?"

Pearl rushed to the bar and in his confusion picked up the nigger cup and filled it with whiskey which splashed over its brim as he carried it out-of-doors. He squatted beside the corpse which Kyle grasped around the waist and the two of them tried to force the liquid between its lips.

Redfield pushed his way through the crowd and looked down, unperturbed. He knelt down and raised one of Hodkins' arms and dropped it, felt of the brow, ran a hand under his shirt and could detect no action of the heart. "Ain't no use; you cain't do nothin'; he's daid," he proclaimed, rising to his feet. "Might as well tote him in the house."

Pearl bethought himself of the fighting Negroes, still pommeling each other and rolling on the ground as if nothing untoward had occurred. Hammond hung on the edge of the crowd, his attention divided.

He saw Pearl enter the ring and heard him call to the fighters, "Stop it. Fight all over. That's a fuggin' 'nough." He reached to part the combatants, who paid no attention to his words, but drew back in fear of a blow and instead, kicked them, catching Mede on the rump.

"Let 'em go," Hammond implored Pearl. "My buck winnin'. Don' go stoppin' it."

"Your buck already won, now. We gives him the fight."

"Ain't final. I wants to win final," Ham argued. He wanted no indecisive victory.

"Your buck wins," said Pearl, and with a glance toward the crowd, which was following the dead man, being dragged indoors, added, "Ain't nobody lookin' noway. You wins. Pull off your fuggin' varmint an' I'll handle this one."

Hammond called upon Mede to desist, but he continued to parry Armand's attack. Hammond grabbed him by the shoulder, and Alcorn, who lagged behind the crowd, came to Pearl's assistance in controlling Hodkins' slave.

"This 'un's the best buck. Let 'em go an' he'd whup," argued Alcorn.

"Mista Maxwell already won," declared Pearl.

"It's a stand-off. Ain't no finish to it. I got my money on this buck an' I seen it all," persisted Alcorn. "I ain't a-goin' to lose my money that a-way."

Hammond doubted that Alcorn had a bet, but thought it best to quiet his clamor. He pulled a gold slug from his pocket and slipped it into the hand of the other who pocketed it without a word but discontinued his protest.

Both the Negroes were bruised, and Armand was bloody, but neither was seriously injured. Mede was complacent to obey his master, but his opponent required white men's curses and threats to keep him from attacking again and finishing the fight. His honor was impugned and Armand pouted in a corner of the tavern, mumbled and wept.

Nobody knew what to do with Hodkins' body. Nobody knew who he was, where he had come from or where he was going. His Negroes did not know either or were too frightened to answer. Armand, it appeared, had been the man's slave for a year or two, had fought for him before, but couldn't tell where or how often. He said that his former owner was "Masta Dan'l," but he didn't know whether Daniel was a first or last name. The yellow boy had been bought a few weeks previously at the Forks-of-the-Road above Natchez, as nearly as could be surmised, from a coffle bound from Kentucky to the New Orleans market. This was comprehensible, since the boy was too young for sale as a single lot under Louisiana law, although everybody knew that such a law was easy to evade.

The dead man's pockets were explored and yielded a leather poke with three hundred, sixty-five dollars in gold, and seven dollars and a few cents in silver. Also in the poke, tightly folded among the coins, was a paper on which was scrawled "February 11, 1832. $225.00: For $225 gold, in hand, I vend to C. Miller the bright mulatto boy name of Kittie warranted sound

in body and mind a slave for life. (Signed) F. C. Elton." At least the signature looked like F. C. Elton, although one could not be sure of it. The yellow boy admitted to the name of Kittie or Kit.

In the inside pocket of the coat was a penciled letter, with no wrapper, which read: "Dear friend i take my pen to let you no we are wel cepting the baby he has a running off and is pretty sich. Simon has come only I have not saw him yet have you got any money if you have got any please send it cause I need it the lame whench come fresh with a buck sucre last mo no more for now with love (signed) Cary."

Neither Kit nor Armand admitted to knowledge of who Cary might be.

The remainder of the fights arranged for the afternoon were postponed until the following Saturday; but the dead man and his estate proved as good as the fights to stimulate the consumption of whiskey.

It was decided that Pearl should arrange for the burial of Hodkins, pay for it from the money in the poke and retain the surplus until it should be claimed. Kit was to be awarded to Hammond as a trophy of the fight, together with the bill of sale from Elton to Miller, for what it was worth. Nobody knew whether Miller and Hodkins were one and the same person. The assent of the crowd to the fairness of such an arrangement dissipated any cloud on Hammond's title. It was decided that Redfield should take Armand to board and to work for a reasonable time until a rightful heir should be discovered, although in the event that none should be found, the slave should revert to Pearl. It was all easier than to resort to legal formality and just as equitable.

As for the settlement of the few monetary bets posted with Pearl, he returned their money to the losers and paid off the winners from Hodkins' gold. The fight had not been finished, and nobody could complain about such a procedure. Everybody was pleased.

As soon as he could, Hammond bought a final round of drinks and prepared to go home, although it was only midafternoon. He was grateful for Redfield's moral support and, in the process of shepherding his three servants, asked Redfield when he purposed to bring his wench to Mede, who was available to him at any time.

"May do it tomorrer, an' if you're goin' to be in. Know you all don't mark the Sabbath."

Hammond mounted his stallion and had Mede hand Kit up to him. Mede and Star rode the gray mule behind him toward home.

Warren Maxwell, surprised by his son's early return, was as happy to see him as if he had been on a far journey.

"Mede done fetched you another saplin'," Ham, elated, greeted the older man, who was more concerned that Ham had fetched himself.

"You early. You safe an' sound?" He immediately regretted *sound,* since it made him conscious, and he fancied made Ham conscious, of the stiff knee.

Reassured, he directed that the new slave be brought into the house for his inspection.

Kit came, was stripped and examined casually, and was approved more heartily than Ham had anticipated. "Right pert," the old man agreed. "Fatted an' trained, he good enough fer house nigger. Whyn't we give him to Lucretia Borgia to learn him manners?"

"House already full on 'em," Hammond objected.

"House-broke yaller bucks sells high. Good market," argued the father. "This one too frail built fer a hand. Tamed fer the house, he fetch as much an' sell younger. Lucretia Borgia keep him out from under foot."

"When they tamed, we ain't a-goin' sell 'em, cain't part with 'em."

"Sell? Sell any of 'em. Sell Memnon, sell these twins, sell Lucretia Borgia an' she bring our price. How many times I got to tell you this a nigger farm?"

"You doesn't mean Ellen? Or even Dite? Couldn't sell them."

"Not long as you wants 'em, or till we takes your sucker outn Dite. We keeps that an' if sound an' we likes it."

Hammond dubiously assented to the plan for Kit and sent Meg to summon his mother.

Lucretia Borgia looked at her new charge with disdain. "Regula' hopper-grass. No meat on its laigs. Not 'nough ass to slap good," she evaluated.

"You got to fat him up," said Hammond.

"I breaks 'em and you all ruins 'em. Look at Memnon; look at them triflin' twins, eatin' offn plates an' talkin' honery. No whuppin', no nuffin'." She wished the other wenches might hear her talking up to the masters.

"I say break him, I means break him," decreed the father. "After, I does as I a mind."

Lucretia Borgia shrugged and grabbed the boy by the naked yellow shoulder. "Whut you all say, Masta, suh. Got to wash him 'fore I so much as whup him."

"Whut fer?" asked the younger master.

"Whu' fer? Why to tame him, suh, Masta. Don't reckon I kin tame a buck 'thout whuppin', does you, Masta, suh?"

"He yourn. Do as you likes," Hammond dismissed her and the subject. Lucretia Borgia guided the child through the dining room, mumbling to herself.

Hammond sat down to relate the events of the afternoon. He told of Hodkins and his sudden death.

"Hodkins? I know him. That his right name. A big man with brushy cheeks? That's him," said Maxwell. "Used to pass through, buyin' and sellin' an' tradin'. Right honest and honorable, but wouldn't pay nothin'. Wanted niggers fer tin whistles. Wanted prime hands fer five hunert, an' stopped comin'."

"Queer, Redfield not a-knowin' him. Knows ever'body."

"Before Doc set up. This risin' price cowed him out—reason, likely, he

take to fightin'. That right; come from Tennessee. Had fergot Hodkins, my own self."

"But this Miller on the paper?"

"Don' mean a thing. Mayhap he go by 'Miller' at times, fer his reasons. Don' fret; your claim to the Kit buck sound. Doc an' Pearl and them will back you. Howsume'er, better change its name an' learn it that Lucretia Borgia is its dam."

Hammond went to the cabin to see to it that Mede was properly bathed, massaged with serpent oil, and put to bed. He was not sure how much the boy had been battered, and further, he wanted him fully recuperated on the morrow if Redfield should come, as he had contemplated.

He was not exactly fond of Redfield, but he knew the subtle spell of the veterinarian's tongue and wanted his continued friendship and support at the tavern. But for him and Pearl, the day's fight might have been a draw and all bets declared off. He knew the Doc, dollarless before his marriage to the widow, was impressed by the Maxwell possessions and especially by the Maxwell servants. Redfield had an eye for good animals and endorsed the Maxwell astuteness in their management. Now that he had come into the ownership of the Johnson Negroes, he planned to weed out the old, accumulate the young and vigorous, and to ape the successful Maxwell economy on a smaller scale.

The following morning Sapho was in labor. Lucretia Borgia announced it at breakfast. Hammond hurriedly finished his meal and went to the cabin where he found Dido in charge. The woman lay on her bed, struggling and groaning, her face distorted with prolonged pain, which had begun at midnight. Dido had done all she knew and Hammond could do no more. Hammond sat down on the side of the bed, and held the hand of the woman, who was deterred by her owner's presence from manifesting her agony, which the master believed had subsided.

While he waited, his father arrived on the arm of Memnon. Drops of sweat stood on Sapho's temples and waves of anguish passed over her face, but she remained silent.

"She ain't workin' at it. Got to keep her workin'," declared the older man. "Git up, Son, an' let her thresh."

"Didn't have no moil time before or before that with her otherns," Hammond said, rising.

The father's smile soothed his anxiety. "Don' fret, Ham," he said. "Mayhap it ain't got more gumption than to try to git out ass foremos'. Bad niggers come that way, but vig'ous, easy to raise."

"But she painin'; she bad," protested the son. "Cain't we do sumpin'?"

"Go to the kitchen," Maxwell turned to Memnon. "Tell Lucretia Borgia to stir up some hot pepper gruel an' fetch it. Never foun' it did no good, but worth tryin'. An' have Meg stir a toddy. Want one, Son?"

Hammond said he did not.

The old man eased himself to a stool before the dead fireplace. "She liable to shed it anytime now."

"She goin' to die. Sapho goin' sure to die," Dido kept repeating in a kind of intermittent refrain.

"Chance one takes breedin' 'em. An' she die, mayhap we kin cut her open an' git the sucker, livin'. Frony got milk; we kin put it on her."

"I sucked Casta's buck chil' along with my little buck, time she die a farrowin' it. Rec'lect, Masta, suh? I save it till it big enough to barn." Dido solicited credit for her salvage.

"But Sapho ain't goin' to die?" Hammond asked, incredulous. "She good nigger an' right young-like."

The old man shrugged as he picked up the toddy which Meg had brought. "Yes, she right val'able, but cain't save 'em all. Some dies," he said scratching his head.

Mem returned with a bowl of steaming gruel, gray with pepper. Maxwell lifted it and tasted the gruel, burning his mouth and spitting. "Liff her up, Memnon, and you pour it down, Dido, afore it git col'."

Sapho had difficulty in swallowing the slab mixture, but did not sense the heat which served as a counter irritant for the throes of her labor. As a result either of the gruel or of her rising to drink it, she was thrown into a violent but futile effort to void her burden. She groaned as she lifted her body in its convulsion of pain.

Tugging at Dido's skirt, Meg whispered a question. Hammond saw rather than heard. "Nev' mind," he commanded sternly. "Go back to that house an' git from under."

The boy gave a reluctant glance backward as he left the door, and as he crossed the area between the cabins he encountered Lucretia Borgia who was showing Doc Redfield the way to the gathering. She paused to admonish her son, "Git you in there, strike that fire an' tote that tub up. You knows you got to wash Young Masta. An' stay away from Sapho whure she squeezin' out her sucker. Ain't no place fer no saplin'."

"That Mista Maxwell's rheumatiz nigger, ain't it?" Redfield asked her, eyeing the boy with admiration.

"That the other one. He better. This one belong to Masta Ham. Spoiled; slothy an' back-talkin'," Lucretia Borgia complained pridefully as she strode in advance of the veterinarian. She was as good a judge of slave flesh as her master and invited a rebuttal of the opinion she expressed.

"Right likely saplin's, I calls 'em," commented the doctor. "Light favored and pert. Goin' to be handy size fer the house; don' wants 'em too big."

"Course, I brung 'em, both of 'em at once," the woman took credit.

"Reckon I don' remember?" Redfield declared rather than asked.

Maxwell shook his neighbor's hand without rising from his stool. "Good thing you happened," he said with renewed confidence. "This wench plugged, seem like. Mayhap, you—."

Lucretia Borgia paused at the bedside, her hands folded across her abdomen beneath her clean apron. "Um, um," she shook her head.

Redfield removed his tail-coat and handed it to Memnon before he went to work. He turned back the covers and examined the woman. "Jest need turnin' around," was his verdict. "It almost come; its ass stickin' right out. If I kin jist turn it over, now. Not as good at this as the widder. May got to send a nigger fer her." He spoke more to himself than to his host.

Hammond alternately hovered behind the worker and limped the earthen floor. Redfield sweated freely as he struggled with the impacted infant with his soiled hand while nobody spoke.

At length he turned the child and said to Sapho, "That well. One more grunt, got one in you. Jest one more an' we got it. Near used up."

The woman struggled weakly, but Redfield was able to grasp one leg of the child. He sighed with relief. "Now we got somethin' to heave by. Go easy now, not wantin' to tear this sucker in two. Another grunt an' you kin. There it come."

He ripped the membrane from the head with the nail of his forefinger, lifted the child by the feet and slapped its bottom until it wailed, felt in his pocket for a jack-knife with which he cut the umbilical cord.

"There you are. Monst'ous; hefts 'bout twelve pound an' fat as leaf lard," he proclaimed.

Sapho was indifferent from her exhaustion, and Dido fell to cleaning the blood and debris from the bed.

"Buck or wench?" demanded Maxwell.

"Wench," muttered Hammond in disgust.

"Had ruther," his father countered. "Buck couldn't stand that kind of handlin'. Besides, wenches lives, once git 'em out alive; an' you sells 'em off and shet of 'em young—ripens fast—especially fair ones. This 'un fair?"

"Near white," said the doctor. "Reckon Ham there."

"Will yeller up some," predicted Maxwell, getting to his feet and feeling the baby's flesh. "Vulcan's, I reckon."

"Give her some oil an' let her lay—two or three days an' you don't need her," Redfield nodded toward Sapho. "She right weakly."

"Do fer her, Dido. You got her two oldern over your place?" Maxwell asked.

"Yas, suh, Masta. They big enough to eat good an' suck bacon, both on 'em."

Dido lifted the baby to Sapho's indifferent breast which it took avidly.

"S'pose that's all. Let's go fer a toddy," said Maxwell, turning. "Almost dinner time. Lucky you come."

Hammond tarried to press a silver dollar into Sapho's hand. "And a new osnaburg," he promised her. "A new osnaburg, soon as you up. Don' let me fergit."

Sapho's eyelids fluttered her gratitude, but she didn't speak.

Hammond hastened, as best his knee would permit him, to join the white men, and overtook them at the gallery. "Fetch that wench of yourn fer Mede, suh?" he asked of Redfield.

"Whut I come fer to tell you. I turned her to Armand last night."

Hammond was taken aback by the blow. "You reckon he the best nigger? Better than ourn?"

"No," Redfield answered without finality. "No. Yourn prob'ly the best; but it quiets Hodkins' boy down an' satisfies him to stay. Keeps him from runnin'. He's a runner. See that *R* burned on his rump?"

"Mede never beat him clean—'ceptin' fer you and Pearl."

"Would in another half hour. Why waste bucks an' nobody to look?"

"I craves my buck to win final—so as nobody goin' to misdoubt." Hammond fumbled in search of his words.

"You-all got ever'thin' an' nothin' good enough" Redfield observed, accepting a toddy from Meg's tray. "Take me; I ain't never had nothin', an marryin' a dozen or like ol' petered out niggers an' a quarter section plantation make me feel a gen'leman. Take you; got this place, always had it, an' the finest niggers around, and you frets a-cause your buck cain't strike the other man's buck dead jest a-lookin' at him. You real gen'lemen, gen'lemen born. Livin' up to it must be hell. Even fret that your suckers don't all come prime bucks."

"It that Hammond blood," affirmed Maxwell. "Ol' Theophilus Hammond always had the best land, the best hosses, the best whiskey, the best niggers, and the best women, an' none of 'em good enough to ease his mind."

"I don't reckon Maxwell blood count none," said Redfield, sipping at his drink.

The old man denied the implication. "I not prideful, never was prideful, nor my papa before me weren't. I knows my niggers likely an' prime. The kind I keeps because it the only kind worth pourin' vittles into, the kind that don't have to stan' a month in New Orleans jails waitin' for a body to buy."

The conversation turned to other themes; the doctor related over the dinner table his version of the story of Hodkins. Hammond, however, did not forget the accusation of excessive pride. It occurred to him in the afternoon while Meg bathed him as he sat in the tub with his stiff leg extended. He wondered. Did a cripple, such as he, have a claim to pride? Was he seeking a vicarious soundness in his fixation upon slaves without blemishes? As for gentility, a white cripple could still be a gentleman if he had, or ever had had, property. In addition, he himself had blood—three generations of planter forebears. Gentility was his birthright, which he could no more avoid than the boy toweling his legs should ever be able to acquire it, than Redfield could acquire it.

It was no matter to make a man proud. A gentleman must live up to his heritage, accept its perquisites and immunities, but the man proud of being

a gentleman was something less than a gentleman, just as the man who aspired to be believed a gentleman, by so much, failed of his aspiration. Perhaps his own crippled leg, by curbing his pride, saved his gentility. Possibly that was its purpose, to chasten him.

Little could be expected from Ellen, but Hammond appealed to her that night. "Is I spreadin' my tail too much, Lovie?" he asked her as she lay in his arms.

"How you mean, Masta, suh?"

"Doc Redfield say I gittin' too proud-like, buyin' a buck like Mede that whup all the otherns, an' a wench like you, lighter an' purtier than any other gen'lemen got. I don't crave to be 'sumptuous an' overbearin'. You don' reckon I overbearin', not to white men?"

"Mista Doc doesn't know what a gentleman is like. I know he is white, but he ain't a gentleman, not like you're a gentleman, or old Masta Wilson's a gentleman."

"I ain't talk' 'bout Doc Redfield; I talkin' about me. Does havin' Falconhurst, an' good hosses, an' fine niggers make me too proudful?"

"I don't know how you treats white folks," Ellen was gradually assuming the vernacular of the plantation; "but you good to your niggers, sure good to them. Me, you—"

"How I treats you don't figure. You my bed-woman, and course I treats you choice-like."

"All of 'em—Meg and Memnon, Lucretia Borgia, an' Mede, an' Big Pearl, even the field niggers, all of 'em. Sapho, today, didn't you give her a whole dollar an' a new dress just for bringin' that wench sucker? Lucretia Borgia tol' me."

"I feed 'em good an' don' work them too hard. That all. With niggers nobody got to spread his tail; nobody. Niggers knows you better than they is. But when you better than another white man, you hadn't ought to let on you thinks it. He cain't he'p it 'cause he ain't got blood an' land an' niggers an' all."

"But you is better, Masta, suh," the girl emphasized.

"You reckon me marryin' that purty young white lady goin' to make me aggravated? Make me more prideful yet? Make me so as no white man kin talk to me?"

Tears suffused Ellen's eyes and Hammond heard her sobbing in the darkness.

"Whut you cryin' 'bout? I didn't do nothin' to you," he said.

"I cain't help it, I cain't help it, Masta, please, suh. You goin' to marry an' I won't be nothing to you, nothin'." He felt her lift her hand and draw it across her eyes to brush away the tears.

"Doesn't you un'erstand?" Hammond demanded. "I got to—got to do it. I promised. Besides, it won't make no difference to you an' me. White ladies don't like no pesterin'; they not like wenches; they detests it; they jest sub-

mits to make a child. I still keeps you."

"But you goin' to love her—more than you love me. Masta, suh, oh, Masta."

"She goin' to be my wife, don' you un'erstan'?" the boy argued. "I got to love her like a white lady. I still goin' love you like a wench. Ain't nobody, ever, white nor black, goin' to take your place. You always goin' to be mine."

"She goin' to be first."

"Course. She got to be. She white," he admitted. "Mustn't git to thinkin', 'cause I takes you into my bed, that you anythin' but a nigger. You purty and clean and sweet-like an' I loves you, but you ain't white, cain't have me a chil', not a white child."

Ellen knew that what he said was true. She offered no rebuttal.

"Not like me givin' you to no buck fer a breeder an' takin' me another wench. You my wench, rest easy; an' I don' want no other. Now, spread out an' let's go to sleep. I got plantin', come mornin'."

Meg's ear at the keyhole caught only random words of the conversation and failed to understand even what he heard. When he was sure the talking had stopped, he lay down outside his master's door and slept.

The following Saturday, the fights arranged for the previous week and interrupted by the death of Hodkins had to be fought and it came as no surprise to Hammond that he was unable to find an opponent for Mede. He would not have gone to Benson that afternoon except for his necessity to see a tailor and to order a suit of clothes in which to be married. The sleeves and pant-legs of the elegant brown suit he had had made in New Orleans eighteen months earlier proved too short and the coat was too tight across the chest. He expected no such masterpiece of the plum-colored outfit he chose in Benson, but he was too busy to make a trip to New Orleans or even to Mobile just to buy a suit of clothes.

It had been decided that Meg should go along with Hammond to Crowfoot as his body servant, and clothes for him, a blue jacket with brass buttons, knee breeches and buckled shoes, were fitted to Star, with allowance made for Meg's slightly greater height. Maxwell had argued that Memnon should go with Hammond on his journey, but the younger man chose the smaller Negro. He needed a servant only to help him with his boots, and, except that custom would demand that a gentleman take one on such an expedition, would have been tempted to dispense with a servant altogether.

At the tavern, Hammond's affability toward Redfield was mistaken for condescension, which the Doctor, aware of the difference in their status, happily did not resent. His comment about pride the previous Sunday he had intended as commendation, not as censure. It enhanced the esteem which the patrons of the tavern felt for the veterinarian that he should be on easy terms with Warren Maxwell's boy, and Hammond needed Redfield's advice and backing in the management of his fighter. Redfield would not permit him to do anything rash. Moreover, Hammond valued his professional services,

which, since his access of fortune, were denied to all but the chosen few. Doc had a way with a cow or a horse or a nigger, knew how to handle them and could bring them through crises in which other medical men would fail. Take that sucker of Sapho's; but for Redfield's ministrations, it would have died, the wench too. To have him on one's side was worth the few drinks that it cost and the show of geniality.

Lewis Gasaway appeared, looking thin and haggard. He had heard about Hodkins' death and was desolated to miss the excitement, but he had had the mumps and had given them to Elijah and to every slave on Long Grove Plantation.

"Them branks done gone down on me, an' they goin' down on Lije," Lewis confessed to Hammond in confidence. "I reckon there ain't goin' to be no more Gasaways. I done in." He shrugged and laughed in his embarrassment.

"Don't know as you ain't lucky," was Hammond's unconsidered reply. "Long as you cain't do nothin', saves you the trouble of gittin' married to no white lady."

"Oh, I kin do sumpin' all right, will be able, that is; on'y it won't do no good—don't bring no spawn. I got seed, but it dead," Lewis denied impotence.

"That whut I a-meanin'," said Ham, his hand on his friend's shoulder. "Don't have the botheration of no white lady."

"Reckon it won't do no good."

"Lije sick, why he never go along with Cousin Charles home?"

"Hell, no. Ole Man caught him tryin' to make off with a hoss an' a prime young wench. That how Lije come down with branks. He got away he wouldn't ketched 'em."

"Whut he doin' with a wench? Charles' papa got plenty of them at Crowfoot."

"Aimin' to sell her in New Orleans, I reckon. Old Man settle that. 'Sides bein' sick, Lije cain't have no hoss at all to go nowhures. Cain't even come to Benson fer the fightin' an' he git well."

"Then he wasn't goin' with Charles? Charles bound last to Briarfield."

Lewis shrugged and asked, "How I know whure they headin'? Lije always talkin' 'bout how he goin' to New Orleans. Crazy. Don't hardly know whut way New Orleans lie."

"Whyn't you fetch along Cudjo?" Hammond inquired.

"Whut good he, without no bettin' buck? Ain't goin' to pit him, noway, agin' that big varmint of yourn. Yourn too vig'ous fer him."

"Thought you craved 'venge," said Hammond, hugging to himself Gasaway's concession of Mede's prowess.

"Uhn, uhn," denied Lewis, shaking his head. "No, suh; no, suh. Uhn, uhn."

Hammond returned home with his Negroes, confident of the invincibility of his fighter. The following week he was equally unable to obtain a match for Mede. The very refusal of the other owners to fight their slaves against

his augmented his belief that his boy was supreme, at least for the area around Benson. His ostensible purpose to win wagers of young Negroes was in fact secondary to his will to be known to possess the champion fighter of the district. No longer need he question that Mede's two victories had been fairly and decisively won. Even if Mede should never fight again—and Hammond despaired of finding an opponent for him—yet he would remain, even to his decrepitude, the foremost fighter of his time and place, a show piece of whom no demonstration was required.

However, May approached. Hammond had to finish the planting and put the plantation in order before he set out on his quest of a bride. While Mede was not permitted to discontinue his training and Lucy rubbed him nightly with serpent oil, Hammond made no more Saturday excursions to Pearl's tavern. Fighting was relegated to a periphery of his interests.

His mother's room, closed since her death, was reopened and refurbished as a bower for his bride. The feather-bed was tumbled, the former owner's apparel removed from the clothes press, which Maxwell called the "ambry," the carpet taken up and dusted, and all made ready for Blanche's reception.

"Reckon we give Tense to Miz Blanche to be her nigger. She big enough, don' you reckon, an' clean an' a virgin?" Maxwell in his enthusiasm, proposed. "That important. Don't want no impure wench a-servin' your wife."

"Needn't fret about that. Major Woodford goin' to give Blanche a little wench fer her weddin', I guess. Usual, ain't it?"

Maxwell snorted, "See that old man givin' nobody nothin'. Ain't got one to give. All blistered till he cain't even sell."

"That money, Charles took along. Like he paid off on some of 'em. Wouldn't be genteel to not give her a wench that she used to."

"Better figger on Tense—'less, that is, you wants that one fer yourself. Cain't pester with your wife's wench."

"Not an' so long as I got Ellen, I doesn't crave no other," said the son.

"Dotin' more on that Ellen than right decent, seem like," cautioned the older man. "All well enough to pester with. Got to have you a wench, course. Remember, she jist a wench."

"I don' care. I don' want no other."

"No sense in you marryin', seem like."

"I hadn't bought Ellen when I promised Blanche. If I'd a went to Crowfoot by way of The Coign, I 'speck I wouldn't never a done it. Besides, you wants a gran'chile, doesn't you?"

Maxwell admitted as much.

"You mustn't neglec' to take Memnon down to the smith afore you go. Don't want no lusty, unringed buck in the house whure there a white lady."

"Been puttin' it off. Mem scared of burnin'. Las' time the smith drop solder on him. Skeared yet."

"Fiddlesticks, smith not goin' to burn him, not to hurt much anyway. Don't got to punch through him this time; hole already in him."

"I take him, come mornin'," Hammond agreed.

"Another thing," bethought the old man. "Ain't decent all these saplin's runnin' around nekid—the bucks especial. They shock her an' she see 'em."

"They in the cabins an' the barn. They don' come around the house. Whut we goin' to do?"

"Better put shimmies on 'em. Plenty of osnaberg an' drill aroun'; an' they easy to sew up—not hardly more than bags. Tell Lucretia Borgia to git 'em made; she know which wenches kin ply a needle."

"Needn't come more than mid-leg."

"Long enough they cain't go aroun' kickin' up an' a-showin' theyself. An' these twins, got to learn 'em to keep buttoned up. They too little to warrant ringin' for a year or two, but got to be decent an' talk decent. Hear?"

Both boys assented with a "Yas, suh, Masta, suh."

"Mine goin' to be all right in that riggin' I buy for him. Cain't fly open, an' I'll hang him up, I hears any dirty talk outn him. Alph too. Have to watch out your own self, I reckon."

"While you gittin', better git one of them brass buttoned habits fer mine, too. Look real nice, the two of 'em alike, an' we kin use 'em on that Kit when the twins grows out of 'em."

"Don't reckon I better git new fer Mem? He's a-wearin' out."

"He do well enough. Make him brush his coat an' clean up."

It was plain to both the men that the presence of a white woman would necessitate some alteration in the plantation mores. Maxwell harked back to the time Hammond's mother had been alive and to the decorum that had reigned. In retrospect it did not seem to him onerous; Blanche could not be more exacting.

"Better fetch up them two mares from pasture an' have 'em clipped an' the harness greased," remarked Hammond.

"Goin' to take the surrey? Better drive them mares a little. Liable to be wil', grassin' all winter."

"Thought the surrey. Cousin Blanche goin' to have a trunk, dresses an' all to fetch along. Goin' the north way, ferryin' good over all the branches. Won't have to swim the wagon."

"Good thing we got it. Hain't hardly been used sence your mamma—. Cain't abide wheels under me. Ruther straddle."

"But a lady—. Hard to ride side that fur."

"I knows. Ladies cain't straddle."

Hammond felt conspicuous and uneasy driving to Benson in a surrey to obtain the clothes he had ordered. A young man without a female companion seemed to him out of his realm in a vehicle. The mares, however, adjusted readily to harness; they traveled in unison and without more skittishness than was expected from horses so long at pasture.

And the clothes he had had made were uncomfortable but would suffice for the purpose intended. The village cobbler had sought to make the boots

as small as Ham could cramp his feet into and, however much pain resulted, they were neat, even dainty. The pantaloons bound Hammond's buttocks, but they appeared firmly sewed and he could ease himself into a chair without danger of their ripping. The coat, with its flaring skirt, was as much too big as the pantaloons were too small. Ten years hence, with a man's development, Hammond might fill its broad shoulders; the tailor had had the boy's immaturity in mind when he had taken his measurements. The excess of sleeve length all but obscured the ruffles on the shirt cuffs. When Hammond shook the wrinkles from it and put it on for his father's inspection, the elder was less impressed with the merits of the garment than with the dignity with which Ham strutted across the sitting room floor, concealing his limp as best he was able.

"Right well set up," was his verdict. "Lady right lucky, I reckon."

"See that goods. Heavy. Wear like 'gater hide," said Hammond insistently, picking up the skirt of the coat and forcing it into the gnarled hands of his father. "Feel it."

"Right strong broadcloth, but ain't any too fine, not a bit. No better'n I wore the time I marry your mamma. Nothin' too stylish to marry in! That little Dutchman as good a bushelman as they got in New Orleans. Couldn't a done no better."

"Couldn't git nothin' fer your twin. Muller got to make it, jest like this 'un fer Meg," Hammond explained, picking up a small blue jacket. "Have to send Vulc or them fer it 'fore I arrives back."

Meg was summoned to try on the suit of which he had known nothing. "Better have him washed first," suggested Maxwell.

"Jest to try fer size, he won't dirty it none," Hammond declared. "Shuck down," he ordered the delighted boy.

Not bothering with stockings, which were a part of the outfit, he had the boy slip his naked legs into the breeches, adjusted the coat over his shirtless shoulders, and, seated on the floor, Meg pulled the shoes on his bare feet. They were his first shoes and he relished the enhancement of his status that would come from wearing them.

"You sure 'nough house nigger now. Got to ack like. No more rushin' around an' scufflin'. No more nekid skin. Got to keep these fixin's whole," Hammond explained. Noblesse did indeed oblige and restrict.

"I still goin' to be yo' nigger, yo' own?"

"I takin' you with me clear to Crowfoot, ain't I? Whut more? Reckon you kin behave?"

"Yas, suh, Masta, yas suh, I behave; I behave good," Meg promised and proceeded to prove that he could not. Unable to restrain his delight and gratitude, he grasped his master about the waist and pressed his cheek against his new coat. Hammond thrust him away and slapped his face, the only way he knew to teach the impetuous boy decorum.

Two days later master and manikin set out on their journey. Pole had

brought the surrey early in the morning and stood patiently at their heads holding the horses. Meg, magnificent in his brass-buttoned jacket, stockinged and shod, sat ram-rod straight in the driver's seat an hour before Hammond was ready to depart.

There was much to be done. Putting on and adjusting the new clothes was itself a chore. A final trip to Sapho's cabin, and one to the Mandingo took up time.

"We come on the tenth, the eleventh sure. Reckon you goin' to git along an' hol' down them hands? Ain't nothin' fer 'em to be doin'; but that when they makes trouble. Course, Lucretia Borgia right 'liable," Hammond voiced his misgivings about leaving his father in charge of the plantation.

"I han'le a passel of niggers 'fore you come along, Son, or Lucretia Borgia either. I ain't fergot how," Maxwell assured his son. Then, lest he sound as if he failed to value the younger man's aid, he added, "Course, I younger then, an' this rheumatiz an' all."

"I back soon an' we start choppin' early, 'fore the weeds."

"Go long now, an' don't fret. Remember whut I say about white ladies. Got to go at 'em easy an' not scare 'em. Not like wenches."

"Ain't no white lady goin' to shy off a fine gen'leman like Masta Ham," Lucretia Borgia interpolated. "Uhn, uhn! Shore look nice in that fine new riggin'." She stood on the gallery beside Ellen who had come out for the leave-taking.

Hammond kissed them both and ignored Alph and Memnon, who attended his father. Tears came to Ellen's eyes but she did not sob. He kissed his father and hugged him to his body.

"You min' yo' manners, nigger, an' do what Masta say—ever'thin' jest like he say," his mother cautioned Meg. "An' take care them new clothes."

"I ain't takin' no blacksnake, but I kin sure tear him down with this buggy whup," said Hammond climbing into the surrey and shoving Meg toward the other seat.

"That's right, Masta," applauded Lucretia Borgia solemnly. "I hopes you goin' to smash him, Masta, suh. On'y way to tame a young nigger."

The world was green with May and the sunshine warmed it well. The rutted and washed roads slowed the surrey, which swayed on its springs, but there was no need for haste. The wedding was set for the eighth, and Hammond had allowed four days for the journey which he could make in three, or in two if pressed. The mares were ardent and Hammond found it necessary to restrain them, not for their own sakes but to steady the vehicle.

The day grew warmer and Hammond removed his coat, folded it and placed it in the rear seat. Later he had Meg take off his boots, which were beginning to grow uncomfortable. They passed plantations and farms, crossed creeks, passed through settlements, some of which aspired to be towns, skirted forests. They met occasional horsemen, all of whom nodded and spoke, some of whom paused to comment on the state of the weather and to inquire whither

they were bound. They passed the two-horse mail stage that carried two white passengers and, relegated to the rearmost of the four cross seats, one stout and very black Negro man, the presumed property of one of the whites. Encamped by the roadside was a group of white persons, a family of three men, two women and an assortment of children, together with a team of oxen, three mules, and two horses, with household impedimenta, en route from Georgia to Arkansas to found a new home. In the late afternoon, just before they reached a dozen houses which made up the town tentatively called Fairfax, they encountered two bearded riders escorting a coffle of five walking slaves, manacled, none of which was robust enough to claim more than a passing survey from Hammond. One of the dealers dismounted to ask whether Meg was for sale, reached into the surrey to feel of his muscles and run a bony finger over the boy's teeth.

Hammond declined negotiations.

"Give a good price," insisted the dealer. "Good, young, light bucks hard to find."

Meg slid toward Hammond in the seat, and watched his face with a degree of needless anxiety.

"No, I reckon not," the owner again declined.

The Fairfax House looked promising and it might be a considerable distance to another settlement where he could spend the night. Hammond drew rein and climbed down from his carriage. Before he entered the hotel, he donned his coat and sat down on the steps to enable his servant to put on his boots.

"Yep, I trow I kin give you supper, you an' your buck," the hotel keeper conceded from his chair in which he leaned tilted back against the wall of the barren room which served as a lobby. "As for sleepin' ye, though, have to double ye up. Reckon that all right?"

Hammond accepted the not unexpected condition.

"Right nice young gen'leman, goin' your way. Clean-like," the hotel man described the proposed bed mate. "Business brisk. Two men in number one; an' now two in number two. Hopes no more comes—not fer sleepin'. Always hates to not have a bed fer a gen'leman. 'Spect you like to bait your team and bed 'em. Livery in back. Got everythin', livery an' all."

"I'll take 'em aroun'," suggested Hammond.

"Nev' mind. Not needful. Hos'ler will carry 'em back," he said, knocking on the wall with his knuckles.

A yellow girl protruded her head through the door, and gave the man a petulant, "Yas, suh."

"Make the Pope carry the gen'leman's rig aroun' back," ordered the man, again leaning back in his chair.

Hammond watched for the slave to arrive and when at length he came, went out to give him instructions.

"I knows, I knows. Don't need no tellin', suh," the one-armed, middle-

aged Negro protested. "But ain't got no oats. Corn. My boss won't buy me no oats."

"Wastes 'em," said the proprietor, who had followed Ham out the door. "Always overfeeds an' over-beds too. The Pope loony-like about hosses. Needn't worry none about 'em mares."

"I feeds 'em good. They petered out," said the Pope, rubbing his cheek affectionately against the cheek of the off mare.

"Want to livery the buck or room him? Two bits extry with a quilt in the room. Jes' as good in the barn, bedded down. The Pope look a'ter him an' not let him run."

"I wants him along," declared Hammond.

"Not in the bed. Not room. Besides, I don't sanctions it."

"Floor good enough," said Meg's owner. "He used to it."

The supper was better than Hammond had anticipated—boiled chicken and heavy dumplings, hominy and greens with hot biscuits, milk, and coffee. The four white guests sat at the host's long table, served by the yellow girl. Meg ate somewhere in the rear of the establishment.

The two older guests sat side by side and after the first perfunctory greeting said nothing. The heavy jowled, round faced boy of approximately Hammond's own age would have been loquacious but for his anxiety to cram his mouth with food. He leaned forward over the table, on which he rested his elbows, scooped solids into his mouth, followed by milk to wash them down. Each time he drank his fuzzy lip was immersed, leaving a ring around his mouth.

"Which way headed?" he turned to Hammond between bites.

"Crowfoot Plantation over Briarfield way."

"That east, ain't it?"

Hammond nodded.

"I goin' east myself, come mornin'. Goin' home. Live 'bout forty mile—thirty, forty, closer forty. Reckon we rides together? Whut say? Sort of lone-like ridin' all by a feller's self."

"I goin' early," said Hammond without enthusiasm. "You got to stir you."

"Sunup, an' you says. Sleep alongside, git up together an' ride together. Stay at my house an' sleep alongside tomorrer night? You'll be right welcome. Sure will," the boy invited affably. "Not fine haired, but better'n this."

"Right kind of you, but we'll see how fur we gits."

"Whut fer you goin'? Lives at that Crowfoot? Whure you been?"

"Lives over by Benson," Hammond explained. "Goin' to Crowfoot to marry me a wife—'speck to."

"Marry?" the youth showed consternation.

"Sunday comin'."

"Marryin'! Marryin'! I wouldn' be marryin', not an' if it was to an angel!"

"Why? An' you ain't ever goin' to marry?" Hammond asked, incredulous.

The moon-faced youth flooded a mouthful of food with milk and shrugged. Swallowing, he grinned and added, "Feared, I reckon; feared. My ol' man married my mamma; I seen too much. Her a-orderin' him, an' knockin' him about till he up on died—jest died of it; jumped in the well an' drowned hisself. Ridden of him, anyways, but the ol' lady still a-livin' an' still a-drivin'."

"My wife—the lady I goin' to marry—not that kin'. Meek like and leanin'."

"Whut your name? Got to git 'quainted. Sleepin' alongside."

"Name of Maxwell, son of Mista Maxwell of Falconhurst Plantation," Hammond identified himself.

"Mine is Church, Mad Church, Madison that is. They all calls me Mad. You call me Mad. We goin' to be friends."

Hammond showed no eagerness but did not reject the offer.

"I taken my papa's blood mare—Moonlight its name is—over to Cap'ain Taylor's blood hoss—name of Spender, Splendor, somepin' like that, anyways he by Zeno, imported—but I never watched it, cain't abide to watch nothin' like that kin'."

"Watch whut of whut kin'?"

"Why, they carryin' on—them hosses," a blush spread over the round cheeks. "Don' see whut makes 'em. Ain't decent—seems like."

"How you reckon colts goin' to come, 'lessen they does?" Hammond queried. "An' I thought you say your papa demised?"

"He dead, but Moonlight ain't. Nominated Moonlight before he jump in well, an' my mamma say we got to do his biddin' an' carry her to the stud hoss." Mad raised his elbows from the table, balanced himself on the rear legs of his chair, grunted, and gazed regretfully at the food he was unable to consume. "Wants to see Moonlight? She purty."

"In the mornin'," Hammond declined indifferently.

Mad went to the stables by way of the kitchen and Hammond reentered the bare commons room, stretched himself, and sat down to wait for bedtime.

The hotel owner came in and commented, "Talkin' fool! Eatin' fool too, fer all that. I don't care. Vittles a plenty. Likes to see 'em fill up. On'y thing I hopes; I hopes he don't lay you awake with his talkin'."

"He ain't a-goin' to—way I feel."

"Moral like, kind of, also, not a-lookin' at them hosses, like he say," continued the host. "Never got that from his paw. I knowed him, Ol' Wash Church, I knowed him."

Hammond grunted an acknowledgment that he had heard, and, as much to avoid the garrulity as to survey the weather, he wandered outside into the twilight. Madison Church emerged from behind the building, one hand resting on the shoulder of Meg, guiding him.

"This here little-small griffe yourn?" he asked, and did not pause for

an answer. "It right smart, smooth, and shapely. Them gol' buttons set it off elegant."

Meg withdrew from his mouth a pale yellow substance and said, "He give it to me, Masta, suh. Gen'man say eat it."

"Nothin' but lemon candy. Won't injure it none. Want some?"

Hammond declined the offer; Madison reached into the small paper bag he had drawn from his pocket and fished out two lemon drops, one of which he placed in his mouth, the other into Meg's mouth. "Always tote 'em," he explained.

"Don't give him no more," Ham adjured. "Give him the bellyache; not seasoned to 'em."

"My mamma got a fambly of 'em, seven, wench an' buck and five young, not like this'n though. Black as dirt, all on 'em, that is 'cept the oldest, an' that one a female," explained Mad and spat on the ground. "It, the yaller one, all time show off around, raisin' up its dress an' rubbin' agin me. Wisht Mamma would git shet of it. Buyers all time wantin' it. Mamma want to keep it to raise from."

"My papa got lots of 'em," Ham said casually and without boasting.

"I like to git me one like this. This 'un ain't fer sale," Mad asserted rather than asked.

"Ain't big enough to be no good fer your wench, anyways," said Ham.

"I know but howsumever—," Madison sighed and didn't finish his sentence. "Takin' it in with you?"

"Aim to; feller said I could."

"Crowded, three abed," observed Mad.

"Don't fret. He ain't abed. He on floor."

"Floor hard. Break its back," Mad objected.

"He used to it," Ham dismissed the subject.

The sun had set and the moon, three-quarters full, had risen. A tree frog called somewhere in the distance. The perfume of wild flowers and of new-turned earth that hung in the sultry air was punctuated now and again by a hint of the odor of skunk, too far off and too infrequently noted to be unpleasant. The two older guests had disappeared, perhaps to bed.

"I goin' in," decided Ham. "When you come, you kin scruge me over."

"Whut I want, stayin' up? I comin'." Mad said.

Hammond, when he had lighted a candle, examined the bed and felt of the mattress. It was of feathers and the quilts appeared clean. There were no sheets. The neatly folded quilt upon the floor concealed its worn spots.

Hammond took off his long coat and folded it carefully, removed his tight trousers and draped them over the same chair. He sat on the bed and stuck out his leg for the young Negro to draw off his boots and socks, then bent forward for the boy to peel away his outer clothing and undershirt. He loosed his drawers and sat again on the bed for the boy to draw them off his legs.

"Now, shuck down," he told Meg, rubbing his body with his hands, "so

as to not wrinkle them clothes. Not goin' to let you sleep in them. Already a-stenchin' in 'em this weather."

Meg wore no underclothes and soon stood naked as his master. Mad tentatively began to remove his outer garments and Ham ordered Meg to help him with his boots.

"I ain't a-goin' to take all off," Mad said. "I don' wants you should see me all nekid. I ain't got no nice hair to cover me up like you. Don't reckon you care none?"

"Don't take nothin' off you doesn't wants. I cain't sleep good 'lessen I shuck down."

Madison, in his shirt and drawers, picked up the candle and, holding Meg by the shoulders, examined him critically. "I swan, that buck smooth and purty," he said, lowering and raising the light. "It better outn its clothes, gol' buttons an' all, than in 'em. Uhm, uhm."

"Not a blemish, not a pimple," Ham proclaimed, crawling under the quilts. "Nigger, wrap yourself an' lay down side the bed. Don't go makin' a lot of noise."

"Bed wide. Let's take it in. That floor monstrous hard," Mad argued. "It kin sleep between, or I will."

"He stenchy. Let him alone," muttered Ham. He was hardly aware when Mad, careful not to disturb him, pinched out the light and crawled into the bed. He slept soundly, threshing his arms from time to time and jack-knifing his legs, oblivious of his bedfellow.

The sun had touched the horizon when Hammond awoke and lay taking stock of where he was. He was alone in the bed, sprawled out and occupying the whole space. Madison Church had gone. Hammond sprang up for his trousers and looked for his poke; his money was undisturbed. Rounding the high footboard to wake Meg, he saw Mad asleep on the floor, the slave in his arms and both wrapped in the same soiled quilt. Their heads were face to face on a pillow which Mad had taken with him when he left the bed.

With his naked foot Ham kicked Meg awake and ordered him to get up. The black boy's efforts to extricate himself from the tightly bound covers roused the white man, who sat erect and rubbed his eyes with his fist like a small child. Hammond's disgust with the sight did not prompt him to demand an explanation, although he was sharp with the sleepy slave who helped him to adjust his clothes, once slapping his cheek because his undershirt went on askew and kicking him aside as he struggled with a boot. It was a white man's prerogative, Ham supposed, to sleep where he would, on the floor with a slave boy if he wished, but Ham was baffled at Madison's choice.

"You flops around and snorts so loud, I jist couldn't git me no sleep. Once you kick me 'most right outn bed. I jist reckoned I'd git down with the buck," Mad was at pains to explain.

"I must a ben flummoxed out. Whyn't you wake me up an' tell me?"

"Did, but ain't no good. You goes off to sleep an' does it agin. Don't

make no matter. I got me a pillow and the buck keep me right warm."

"But floor hard, an' that boy stink. I notice he musky las' night after ridin' an' sweatin', but couldn't do nothin'. I'll swim him today an' wash him, an' I find me a crick."

"I likes stink of sweat, an' if it fresh."

"Not black sweat."

"It ain't black. It yaller."

Meanwhile Meg slipped into his clothes and readjusted a stocking which his master found twisted on his leg. Without prompting, he knelt at Mad's feet to put on his socks and boots.

"That whut I craves me a little buck fer, to he'p me on with my clothes an' things. Like you. I treats one right good, an' I had it, a yaller one like this 'un."

Hammond went out through the kitchen, which was attached directly to the main building of the hotel, leaving Meg there to eat his breakfast, while he himself went on to the stable to order his team. When he returned he found Mad alone at the breakfast table, eating ravenously. Hammond sat down opposite.

"Don't know nobody got a yaller buck like yourn wants to trade it, does you?" Mad, mouth full of food, inquired hopefully.

"My papa got one I won fightin' niggers, not like this 'un—little younger. Might trade an' he got enough."

"Yaller?"

" 'Bout this un's tinge, an' sound."

"I give Papa's blood mare fer it, an' Mamma lets me. Got to ask yet awhile. Let me come twenty-one though—"

"Papa wouldn't trade fer no hoss, nohow."

"She lined by Cap'un Taylor's stud, son of Zeno." Getting no response, Mad added, "I may kin throw in a nigger—that yaller wench I tol' you 'bout. I wished Mamma would; and git shet of it. We ast her; eh?"

"I cain't stop. I goin' through to Briarfield." Offers to buy or trade for slaves were so common and usually so idle that they annoyed Hammond rather than interested him. He was tired of Mad's incessant talk.

"You ain't goin' to stop?" Mad exclaimed, incredulous. "My mamma goin' to be sorry, an' I sure goin' to be sorry. Please, suh, stop. Say you goin' to."

"I goin' to git married, I tol' you, come a Sunday."

"This on'y Friday. You got time, time a plenty. Stop an' see my mamma an' look at our niggers—that yaller slut. We'll ast kin I trade it. Mamma won't show you the idiot, though. Might as well don' ast her that—my idiot sister, name of Clara."

Breakfast over, Mad insisted upon paying Hammond's hotel bill along with his own. "I got money," he said. "You my sleepin' pardner an' my ridin' pardner. I pays." His feelings were injured by Ham's refusal of his offer, but

not enough to keep him quiet.

The one-armed hostler had taken excellent care of the horses, which had been well fed and brushed to a sheen. The slave kissed Moonlight's nose as he held her head for Madison to mount. The bright bay mare was somewhat small and delicately made with a great reach of neck that tapered into high withers—a blood mare, indeed, and her owner belonged to her, a part of her. Once on his horse, his flabbiness left him and he sat erect in the saddle, and his hands assumed a delicate authority on the horse's mouth.

Hammond climbed to his seat in the surrey and told Meg to get in on the right-hand side, cautioning him to sit erect and to straighten his jacket. Madison rode beside the surrey, dropping behind only when the road was very narrow or much rutted.

"Why ain't you goin' to stop at my house?" Mad whined.

"I goin' to git me married, I tol' you a'ready."

"But this on'y Friday," Mad repeated and got no reply. "You doesn't likes me—does you? I 'on't know why. I likes you, likes you awful well."

"I likes you," Hammond declared. "Whut I do, makin' you think—?"

"Nothin'. Didn't do nothin'. That's it. Didn't do nothin'. You don' talk; jest answers. An' you wouldn't let me pay. I know you don' like me. I tries."

"I likes you all right, but I still-like. Go on talkin' an' you wants. I listenin'." Hammond had no will to offend anybody.

"Is it whut I do to your buck?"

"Whut you do?"

"Sleepin' with it, huggin' it up?"

Meg, without turning his head, rolled his eyes toward his master's face.

"Huh," Hammond snorted. "Whut you reckon I care. Wants to sleep on ha'd floor, in ragged quilt, with musky buck, you kin."

"Then you goin' to stop?"

Hammond failed to answer. Madison fell behind the surrey, which traversed some low country, sparsely wooded, with a road that could accommodate only the vehicle. It was cut by a narrow creek, easily crossed.

"Good place to swim the buck, like you said," suggested Madison, "an' wash off his stinkin'."

"Bigger branch farther along," said Ham. "Better."

"Not this siden whure I live. I wants to see it swimmin' around 'thout no clothes on," Mad argued.

"Nothin' to see. Jest a nekid nigger 'at cain't swim right good."

Madison, balked of his wishes, began to weep. He tried to conceal the first tears that trickled down his wide cheeks, but he was unable to hide the petulant sobs which followed. "You mad with Mad," he cried in the third person. "You won't let Mad do nothin'. Mad loves you. Mad want to make friends—like."

Hammond reined in his team and got down from his carriage, half angry at the infantile conduct and half desirous to satisfy his companion. "Git out,"

he commanded Meg, "git out an' shuck, show the gen'leman how good kin you swim. Mayhap he shuck down too an' wash the stink off'n him he got from you."

Madison ignored the implication, but dismounted, tied Moonlight to a tree, rubbed from his cheeks the tears, which had ceased to flow. The sobs were dry now and less frequent.

"I doesn't aim to shuck, 'cause you might laugh at me. You ain't goin' to see me nekid," he declared.

"Don' throw that blue coat on the groun'. Double it up good an' lay it in the buggy, an' hurry up," Hammond was impatient with Meg who was shedding his clothes. "Now jump in that branch an' scrub you good all over, head an' all, an' between yo' laigs, git rid of that smellin'."

Meg waded out into the swiftly flowing, clear rill, and Mad sat down on the bank to watch him.

"It col', it too col', Masta, suh," said Meg, folding his arms tightly against his body and shivering. "Mus' I, Masta, suh?"

"I said," Hammond reinforced his orders. "Lay down in it. Lay right down an' rub yourself, rub hard. You ain't col'."

"I goin' to drownd, Masta, suh. I goin' to drownd sure."

"You does like I tells you. Water, deepest part, ain't more than ass high. I chances you drowndin'. Flop down."

"Don't make it. I don' want it should drownd," Mad supplicated. "Too purty."

"You wanted I should wash him. Now, you doesn't, but I goin' to anyway."

Meg had squatted in the water and was throwing it around his shoulders with his hand.

"You lay in that water. Lay in it and rub good or I goin' to thresh you," said Hammond, breaking a long flexible switch which had grown as a sucker beside a hickory tree. "That goin' to warm you. I'll carry you home agin with striped laigs."

Meg plunged into the water and began to massage himself.

"You ain't a-goin' to, ain't a-goin' to whup it. Please don', Mista Maxwell, suh," Mad pleaded.

"I goin' to, 'lessen he min'." affirmed Ham, standing on the bank, switch in hand. "Slosh you head—clear under. Rub your wool an' behin' your ears. Git 'em clean. Had ought to brung soap."

"Get soap at my house. My mamma makes it," Mad interposed, his fear for Meg's drowning and whipping both having subsided.

"Don' do no good now," Hammond answered him.

They watched the child's efforts to cleanse himself, and at length his master gave him permission to come out, at which, glancing at the switch, Meg was as reluctant as he had been to go into the water. He was, however, his master's man and must accept what he imposed. He waded ashore, brushing

the water from his body with his hands. Mad drew the boy toward him and helped with his larger hands to dry the legs and body.

"Let him roll in that fresh grass," said Hammond. "Roll hard and dry off, an' then put on that riggin' agin."

Madison rose to his feet and watched the young Negro tumble himself among the weeds. When Meg drew on his breeches, Madison untied Moonlight, mounted and waited but without impatience.

A scant hour's drive beyond the creek brought the party to the Church farm, unfenced and undemarcated. Madison had exaggerated its distance from Fairfax, since it was closer to being twenty miles than forty and the sun had not reached the zenith when they arrived.

"This my farm, my mamma's; I live right here," Madison proclaimed.

"Right nice. Cotton all in an' all," said Hammond.

"An' comin' up a'ready," added Mad. "Corn over beyant. It comin' also."

A small orchard of gnarled apple trees in crooked rows ran down to the road and beyond it stood, stark and unprotected from the view of the infrequent passer, a galaxy of small unshaded buildings, houses, barn, cabins and sheds. The barn, surrounded by a worm-fenced paddock, in which stood a cow, two mules and an assortment of swine, was the largest of these. The single story main house of unpainted rough clapboards included a lean-to, porches and additions that appeared to have been tacked on as afterthoughts as necessity for them arose or as means enabled. Two log cabins, presumably for the slaves, stood apart from the house, besides which were a smokehouse with chimney, a corn crib, and a small building with a latticed porch which Hammond assumed was the privy.

A white woman with bare feet stirred with a paddle in a bailed kettle over a smoking fire in the front yard, and a saffron skinned girl on the porch slowly raised and lowered the dasher of a churn. Two babies, black, played and tumbled with an equally black hound, fat to obesity.

Hammond failed to turn in at the driveway, little more than a weed-grown path, and Madison said, "Whure you goin'? I lives here, right here."

The fat hound left his playmates and came forward wagging a lazy tail.

"Well, I hopes we meets," said Hammond.

"You comin', suh. You got to. You mus'," said Mad in a kind of terror.

"I got to git on toward Briarfield."

"You got to eat dinner, ain't you? It time," countered Mad. "An' you got to see my mamma an' Moonlight's last year colt an' the niggers. An' Mamma got to see you an' your buck; I wants to show her the kin' I wants."

Hammond, fearful of more tears, turned into the farm. The woman stood akimbo and watched the surrey approach, turning and speaking to the girl who left the churn and disappeared into the house.

"Luke, oh Luke, come an git these hosses an' carry 'em to the barn," she called. "Git down, git down and set till I gits dinner," she welcomed her guest.

"This my frien', Mamma, bes' frien' I ever got, Mamma. Name of Mista

Maxwell, somepin' like that; an' his griffe buck, Mamma. It the kin' I wants you should ought to buy me, Mamma," Mad explained hysterically.

"Laws, I wasn't expectin' nobody to come," the small woman exclaimed, winding a loose strand of hair about the knot on her head and wiping the palm of her hand on her dress before she extended it. "You jest got to excuse my looks. I was a-renderin'; reckoned it a good day fer it."

"Your boy urged I stop. I craved to git on," Hammond explained the occasion of his arrival.

"Oh, I wasn't meaning that. You're welcome; of course you're welcome. Right glad you come. Glad on it. I jest mean I didn't fix an' all. I right plagued to be seen this way."

Luke, a sturdy ebony man of early middle years, with a squinting tic, appeared and took the team and Moonlight. "Did you git her covered?" he asked his young master.

"That whut Cap'in Taylor tell. I never watched," Mad answered him.

"Come in, come in; mus' be tired after all that way," said Mrs. Church without any concept of the distance Hammond had driven. "But you got to talk to Mad there while I go fix."

"But, Mamma!" her son protested, pushing Meg forward by means of his hand on the child's reluctant head. "You got to look at Mista Maxwell's little nigger. Ain't it sweet? Gol' buttons an' ever'thin', Mamma. Mamma, look at it. This is the kin' I been a-cravin', jest the kin'."

"Might as well hush. You know I cain't buy you no fancy nigger. I go to buy you a nigger, I go to buy a growed up 'un that I kin use on Emmaline, in there. She jest a-wastin'," Mrs. Church protested, but paused to ask, "How much fer it? I reckon it steep."

"It ain't fer sale, Mamma. This one ain't fer sale. I offers Moonlight an' Emmaline both, but Mista Maxwell won't trade," Mad explained.

"Oh!" Mrs. Church comprehended. "I haten to not git Mad whut he wantin' an' see him cry—no papa and all. But if it ain't fer sale—" She looked down at herself, turned and went into the house. Mad showed no disposition to weep, but turned to the two babies, to whom the hound had returned. "This two of 'em," he said, lifting the smaller and quite naked child and extending it toward Hammond for his examination. "Right fat-like, ain't it? Jennie is weanin' it." Mad forced a lemon drop into the baby's mouth.

Hammond grasped the child's leg with a pretense of interest he did not feel. "Fat-like, but crooked laigged," he criticized.

"That one," and Mad lifted the short smock of the larger child, "is on'y a wench. You don't wants to see it. Whut you wants to see is Moonlight's las' colt. Luke, you Luke, halter that Too Sweet an' carry him up here fer Mista Maxwell. Goin' to make him a stud-hoss when he grows big. He by Meteorite. Papa bred him before he jump in the well, but Moonlight never drop him till after. Papa never got to see him. An', send out Jennie an' them bucks. Mista Maxwell kin be looking at them while you fetchin' Too Sweet."

Hammond was getting hungry and, since dinner was ignored, he suggested, "I better be gittin' on to Briarfield."

"Laws," said Mrs. Church, emerging from the house. "You goin' to stay an' eat. Ain't no sense, goin' jest at dinner. Won't hear it, won't hear it." She wore a long, clean, much starched frock of red calico, and was shod. Her blond hair had been freshly combed and knotted on the back of her head. A long pin, from which only a small area of gold had vanished to reveal its brazen base, decorated the front of her dress. The rapid change had transformed the slattern into a woman of tolerable prettiness and she was aware of it. She smiled coquettishly and hid her red hands in the folds of her skirt.

"I won't trouble you, ma'am. Jest stopped 'cause your son wouldn't take no."

"I'd a ben mad, plumb mad, suh, an' you didn't," she answered, dropping her eyes. "I real pleased, you a-likin' my Madison. Most don't. He don' mean no harm."

Hammond saw no need for denial.

Jennie came from the cabin, leading by the hand a small black boy in a frock reaching to his knees. They were followed by a larger child in breeches and shirt, clean and uncomfortable, probably donned in haste for the occasion. "You wants us, Masta, suh?" Jennie asked.

"Wants my bes' friend should see you all. That all. Now show yourself."

Jennie assumed a rigid pose between her two sons, the older of which, when he advanced too far, she pulled back in line with herself and the younger. Jennie was a well enough made black woman, of Ashanti type, by no means pure, with protruding buttocks, massive, pendent breasts, and spreading, flat feet. Hammond could see nothing about her to justify any pride of owning her.

"She the dam of 'em all," proclaimed Mad, waving his hand as if to include a vast population. "Slowin' down though; ain't had nothin' sence that littles' one."

The woman laughed aloud nervously. " 'Tain't me," she said. "Ain't me, Masta. It that Luke, he don' do nothin' no more. Ain't no good fer me at all."

"You got to talk to Luke, Mad. It your place to," said Mrs. Church. "I been a-thinkin' it was him."

"I cain't talk to him, Mamma. I not know whut to tell him. I don't want nothin' to do with it," Mad whined.

"That biggest one jest gittin' up from a whalin' las' week. Caught thievin' aigs. Mad wouldn't do nothin', whup it or nothin' at all an' I had to make Luke thresh it. Luke overdo, near kill it. Backside all cut up and bleedin'," Mrs. Church apologized needlessly for what was not apparent. "Learn Mad a lesson—to whup his own niggers. Sence his papa died—"

"I cain't, Mamma. I cain't," Mad protested. He twisted his body as if he felt on his own skin the impact of the lash. "Whuppin' a nigger hurts. I doesn't crave I should hurt 'em."

"Somebody got to. Cain't let 'em thieve an' run wil'," said his mother. "Don' see why you don' relish it. Most does."

"I doesn't like it neither," Hammond supported Mad. "Ain't much whuppin' on Falconhurst. They don' need it."

"See, Mamma? Mista Maxwell don' like it, an' I ain't a-goin to. Ain't he kin' an' nice, Mamma?"

"That littler one don' grow none. Not puny, but it jist won't grow. Feed it good, like the rest. Whut you reckon?" Mrs. Church sought advice.

"Might need wormin'," Hammond suggested. "Worms slows 'em." He was at a loss for further comment about the two black striplings, about which he saw nothing to commend or to censure. He was not enough interested in them to handle them or even to look at them more than casually.

However, the yearling colt which Luke was leading toward the house was another matter. Here was grace, beauty, strength, spirits, aristocracy.

Mad opened his arms and called, "Too Sweet, come hyer!" and the colt lifted his ears, nickered, and kicked.

Leggy in the manner of yearlings, the knees were yet knobby, and the only partly shed winter's coat was patched and moth eaten; but in the formation of the quarters, the shortness of back from pelvis to withers, the girth of rib, the reach of slender neck, and the lay-back of shoulder blades Hammond saw an ensemble of power and speed. He walked around the colt, warily approached it and ran his hand down the off front leg. The fat hound resented the interference of a stranger with family property and growled a warning, at which Mad reproached it gently and told it to go and lie down. The hound only looked at him and wagged its tail.

"That sure a purty hoss a-standin'. I wonder kin it move."

Luke, without orders, moved the colt fifty yards along the driveway and returned, after which Madison vaulted to its bare back and guiding it by the mane, galloped at random about the yard. Slipping to the ground, he encircled the colt's neck and kissed its shoulder. "Mamma say that star on his forehead goin' to blink out. Will it, you think?"

"Smallen some, anyways," Ham opined. "Ain't no difference. He got the bones."

"But them stockin's goin' to stay? He won't lose them."

"He keep them; but whut you care? Course you likes 'em purty, but color don' make no hoss. It bones that makes a hoss, an' he got bones."

"Barn him, Luke. Don' turn him back to no pasture. Barn him. Hear?" Madison instructed the groom.

Luke looked at his master and squinted thrice. "Barn him you says, Masta, suh?"

"Mad is jist like Wash Church," declared the woman, "hipped about hosses. Wanted blood hosses all his life, an' time he got that blood mare, jump in the well. Oh, well; don' make no difference I reckon; it Mad's now an' he relishes it jist as much as his papa."

She led the way into the house. The door opened directly into the sitting room, through which the party passed to the small dining room beyond. Rough crockery was laid for four places at a round table with a broken porcelain caster which caused it to wobble.

"'Tain't much," Mrs. Church apologized. "Set down. I had ought to a-knowed you was a-comin'. Didn't even know fer sure Mad was a-comin'. You have got to 'scuse it."

The table was loaded with provender, ham and eggs, fried chicken, boiled potatoes, yams, cooked greens, yellow corn bread, pitchers of milk, jellies, jams, and pickles. Mad sat between his mother and Hammond and immediately fell to gorging himself, while the woman, in her anxiety that Hammond should be served and should eat his fill, herself ate hardly at all.

The yellow girl appeared, guiding with her arm about her waist, a wizened, palsied, toothless old crone in a clean black cotton dress. The girl eased the old woman into the seat opposite Mad, who, together with his mother, ignored her presence completely. She was from time to time addressed as "Granma" by the girl who helped the old woman to food, cut her meat into small pieces, and, when it seemed impossible for the woman to manipulate her fork, placed the food between her gums. Such food as she was unable to swallow without mastication, she would remove from her mouth with a slow gesture, look at it and replace it upon her plate.

Who the woman was Hammond was never told. She did not speak, but halfway in the meal, she pushed away her plate, looked up at the girl, and made a futile effort to rise. The girl encircled her waist again, helped her up, and led her back whence she had come.

The girl returned in a short while, picked up a fan of turkey feathers, which she wielded to drive flies from the food, except when, from time to time, the hostess sent her to the kitchen for more food, none of which was needed.

"You don' eat hardly none at all," Mrs. Church addressed Hammond. "Sorry it not better."

"Plenty, ma'am; plenty an' as good as ever I et," the guest told the literal truth.

"You got to excuse my Mad, eatin' so much. He right hearty now. Used to be so delicate, not real puny, but delicate. Never et enough, an' got to make up. Gettin' more like his papa; Wash Church was good at eatin'. Liked his vittles nice."

"I tol' him we lived better than the eatin' up to Fairfax," Mad paused to say. "Ain't it?" he asked Hammond who confirmed the opinion.

"When he showed off the niggers, Mad never showed you off this yalla wench. Go round there, Emmaline, an' let the gen'leman look at you," Mrs. Church commanded. "Mad doesn't relish it, but I think it right likely; don' you, Mista Maxwell? Don' know whure it come from; only bright one Jennie

ever had. Wash Church's I reckon, but I never blamed him, never in this worl'."

"Right useful kind," Hammond commented but failed to specify for what purpose.

"I had three idiots besides Mad there, an' I set my foot down. Two of 'em died but I had 'em. One alive in the room with Granma. But I didn't want no more young 'uns an' I wouldn't have no more. Jest couldn't blame Wash Church, anythin' he done. Reckon that why it yella an' all the other ones black. An' I wouldn't blame Mad neither. He big enough it wouldn't injure him none, an' he could abide it, but he cain't."

"Always rubbin' around me an' showin' itself. That why," Mad explained.

"Got to marry it to a broad buck. Cain't buy none right now. Mathews got some extries I reckon."

"Luke, out there," suggested Hammond.

"Jennie say Luke failin'. Besides an' all, Luke is its pappy—says he is. If you stays the night—," Mrs. Church delicately failed to conclude her sentence.

"No, suh! No, suh! Mamma!" Mad objected. "He goin' to sleep alongside of me right in my bed, him an' his little buck Buck's clean. We washed it."

"I cain't stay, Mad. I jes' come in to eat to keep you still, keep you from cryin'. I cain't. Cain't you un'erstan'? I cain't."

"You likes Too Sweet real well, don' you?" Mad demanded.

"Purty a colt as ever I seen," Hammond's approval was not feigned. "I tol' you I like him."

"Tell you whut! Kin I, Mamma, kin I? I give you Too Sweet an' if you stay. I give you Too Sweet. Kin I, Mamma?"

"Whut would your papa say? His blood colt?" Mrs. Church hesitated and looked at her son. "All right, all right, an' so you don' cry. Don' cry, Mad," she begged. "He yourn. Do like you wishes."

"I cain't stay. You all know I cain't stay. I done tol' you I goin' to git married. I couldn't stay an' if you given me the whole farm, hosses, niggers, an' all," Hammond declined the bribe. "Couldn't take that colt offn you as a gif' no way. You needs him, your own self. You values him higher than a nigger. Mighty kin' of you, mighty kind. No, suh."

"That the reason. You my best frien'. I wants you should have him. You likes him good."

"Naw, suh. Thank you, suh, jest the same. I got to go 'long an' if you orders my team brung. Thankee, ma'am, fer a fine dinner." Hammond rose from the table, determined to extricate himself as soon as possible from the strange infatuation of his host. An aura of undefinable evil hung over the place, making him uneasy and anxious to escape.

"Cain't go yet," argued Mad. "Got to set while your buck eat. He hongry."

"I reckoned he done et. I'd thank you to feed him," Hammond resigned himself to wait.

Mad summoned Meg from the dooryard where he kicked his heels in waiting, ushered him through the sitting room, where Ham sat with impatience, into the dining room and seated him at the place he had himself vacated. He heaped food from the various platters upon his soiled plate and said, "Eat a plenty."

"Yas, suh, Masta, suh," Meg responded, in his embarrassment at eating in a white man's dining room. He sat stiffly erect in the chair that was too low for him and tried to manipulate his fork as he had seen his master do.

"Whure that big book, that there Bible? Got to lift it up, so it kin eat good," and Mad wandered through the sitting room into an adjoining room and returned with the large tome which he adjusted on the chair beneath the boy to enable him better to reach his food.

Hammond called from the sitting room, "Mad, leave that boy alone an' let him eat his dinner. He eat better withouten no white gen'leman a-fussin'."

"It a-eatin' all right." Mad replied, spooning a quantity of pickles upon Meg's plate and pouring a glass of milk. "Brush them flies offn its plate, Emmaline. Cain't you see nothin'! An' fetch more hot corn-bread outn the kitchen fer it." Mad picked up the glass from which Meg had drunk and took a swallow of milk, which adhered to the short down of his upper lip. He continued to hover behind the young slave and replenish his plate before it was emptied. Meg looked up at him and smiled his wonder and gratitude at the unwonted service.

"Wished you'd come in here an' stop a-dishin' up fer that nigger," said Ham uneasily. "A white man; it ain't fitten."

"I admire to watch it eatin'," replied Mad. Meg was an animated toy to Mad, far enough below a white man in the scheme of things that he feared no derogation of his status in his indulgence of his whim to serve the boy at table. His employment of the neuter pronoun demarcated the slave from the man. Mad's contumely to the inferior race was, in fact, greater than Hammond's own, since Hammond was at pains not to transgress the barrier that divided the master from the slave, while the other assumed the chasm so abysmal that it was impossible to cross by any means.

Meg's stomach could hold no more and he stopped eating, but he did not know whether it was expected of him to leave the table. He sat upright and still, his legs dangling from the Bible.

" 'Nough?" Mad asked, lifting the chair backward, stooping to help the boy to the floor and to brush the crumbs from the front of his blue jacket. "Them gol' buttons sure looks scrumptious," he commented.

Hammond was on his feet, pacing the floor, and the surrey was waiting. He thanked his hostess and bade her good-bye as they made their way out the door. Meg climbed to his seat in the surrey.

Mad grasped his guest's hand and encircled his body with his left arm. Tears welled to his eyes. As Hammond extricated himself from Mad's grasp upon his hand and took his place behind the horses, Mad broke into sobs. "I

ain't never goin' to see him agin," he wept. "He my frien' an' he a-goin', he a-goin'. Fetch Too Sweet. I wants he should have Too Sweet to remember me. Goin' to give him, even if he won't stay an' sleep. Luke, I tol' you to fetch Too Sweet."

Hammond did not wait. It was of no avail to deny the youth with words. Mad's face was convulsed and tears in rivulets trickled down his cheeks as his best friend drove away without his gift. Hammond heard the mother's vain efforts to comfort her son.

"Masta, suh," Meg asked, "whut ail that gen'man?"

"None of your put in," replied his master. "Jes' that way, that all. Straighten that jacket an' set up now, an' don' be lookin' back."

CHAPTER 22

HAMMOND reached Briarfield late in the same afternoon. He might, he calculated, as well have postponed his setting out by another day, but the occasion of his trip was so momentous that he did not begrudge the waste of time. He might have remained in Fairfax, where the hotel accommodations and the food were better, he knew, than he would find in Briarfield. There was ample daylight left for him to complete his journey to Crowfoot, but he was somehow reluctant to reach his destination.

He knew nobody in Briarfield, except for his childhood acquaintance with Dick Woodford, and he avoided seeing him lest he should be prevailed upon to relinquish his bed at the hotel to sleep with his future brother-in-law. He wanted a whole bed for himself, and since he was the sole guest at the Maddox House, one was available for him.

The livery stable was across the road from the hotel and under a separate ownership. Hammond went over there to engage accommodations for his horses. The tall, lean Negro who was in charge of the stable was so lackadaisical and lazy that Hammond remained to see to it that the horses were adequately fed and bedded down for the night.

"Whure's your masta?" Hammond demanded. "Seem funny, leavin' a slothy bastard like you to take a gen'leman's hosses."

"I rents," explained the slave. "You knows me, suh. I Masta Major Woodford's nigger out on Crowfoot. He rent me out to Masta Jackson whut run this stable, suh. Yas, suh. I seen you out to Crowfoot time back."

"I goin' to tell Major Woodford you ain't good fer a god damn. You needs touchin' up 'round the edges. Whut you needs, an' you doesn't hurry up with them oats."

"Naw, suh; naw, suh, Masta. Don' tell Masta Jackson like that. I brings the oats. Whut you tells Masta Major don' mean nothin'. He ain't goin' to do nothin'. I mor'gage or somethin'."

"Then you know Mista Dick Woodford. Whure at will I find him?"

"I don' izactly know, suh, whure Masta Dick at. I seen him youther day. Mayhap he over to Crowfoot."

"He stays in Briarfield," said Hammond.

"Maybe he do, maybe he do," the Negro said, shrugging. "Masta Charles ain't home; gone clean away."

"He back now."

The Negro, not daring to contradict a white man, shrugged again. "That gol' studded little buck yourn, suh?" he asked. "Ain't big 'nough. Whyn't you trade it off an' git you a big one? One like me? You always goin' aroun'; I likes it, to go aroun'."

"Why you long, lazy, son-a-bitch. An' I own you, I'd feed you to my hogs. Take you 'round!"

"Yas, suh; yas, suh!" The Negro laughed aloud at the idea, which he was not permitted to resent. "You sleepin' at that hotel? I got a wife—"

"Black and musky, I reckon."

"Naw, suh, Masta. I'll wash her good. Wants I should fetch her over? On'y cos' you a dollar."

"Nev' mind," Hammond declined the pleasure.

"Four bits, suh?"

"Don' care an' it two bits," said Hammond scornfully. "Pitch more straw in them stalls, twice as much again."

"Ain't nothin' to me. Money goes to Masta Major. Lots of white gen'lemans uses her."

"Have that rig clean an' ready first thing in the morning after sunup. Hear?" Hammond instructed the boy and went back to the hotel.

He took Meg to the kitchen, where the fat, black cook was desolated at the refusal of the youth, who had surfeited at the Church farm, to eat the food she offered him.

"You cunnin'!" the cook informed Meg, when his master had gone. "You cunnin' as you kin! Whure at you masta git you at?"

"My masta breeded me outn Miz Lucretia Borgia. She my mammy," declared Meg proudly. "I Masta's nigger, his body nigger all time."

"Sho' 'nough? He treats you good, I reckon? Way he dresses you, gol' an' all."

"'Ceptin' when he hang me up an' hide me. Hang me up ever' week almos'; an' after he snake me good, he rub stuff in, pepper an' all 'at sting awful. I sore now, all over my back an' ass," Meg lied boastfully and added lie to lie to make it good.

"Whut fer you masta thresh you so much? He look like a kin' gen'leman. Why you bad an' don' do right?" The fat cook's questions were at once compassion and reproof.

"I pesters Ellen. That why he whup me so hard. Ellen is Masta's yaller wench. She sleep with, right in bed with, him."

"You pesters? You ain't big enough to pester a doodle-bug."

Meg doubted that the cook believed his story in its entirety. "'Sides," he added to embellish it, "I steals Masta's corn an' drinks it. I gits right drunk. To cure up my rheumatiz."

"You got rheumatiz? Now, that bad," sympathized the only half-gullible cook. "An' you so little!"

"Oh, I dreens it. I dreens it into a little nigger, whut Masta given me to dreen it into. The othern do the hurtin', not me. I jest drinks the toddy."

The cook smacked her mouth in pity and shook her head.

"An' I lies, lies awful to my masta. That whut fer he hang me up the las' time. Tha's whut fer I got scabs all ova me now. But mos' in general Masta neva knows I fibbin'. Masta a kin' of fool."

"You hadn't ought to be talkin' that way 'bout you masta. He goin' to hear you. Then—"

"Ain't no diff'ence. Masta won't do nothin' now. He goin' to sell me, goin' to sell me right off, goin' back, soon as we gits married."

"Soon as you git marry? Whut you mean?"

"We goin' to git married. That why he carry me. To a white lady. Way back, he goin' to sell me to Masta Mad. He worse. He all time whuppin' his niggers. Ever' mornin' 'fore breakfast Masta Mad he whups 'em, ever' one of 'em, till they bloody all over. Breaks they bones an' ever'thin'. An' he honger 'em too, don' give 'em no vittles hardly at all. An' work 'em!" Tears of fear and self-pity ran down his cheeks and wetted his sleeve, and his body convulsed in terror. "Masta Mad say he goin' to break me, if he got to break me into pieces. He say. He say he goin' to give me a dose of snake ever' day till I cured. I'll run. That whut I'll do. I'll run. I'll run here—tain't fur hardly. You'll feed me an' hide me till Masta Mad cain't kotch me? Won't you? I run right here."

"Why, no; no ma'am! Needn't be runnin' here!" Discretion had replaced compassion in the cook's emotions. "White folks whup you, I reckon you warrants it. White folks knows. You theirn. They goin' ack like they's a-mind. No ma'am, no'um. I ain't in it. Yo' new masta tear you down, you stay away frum here, clean away. My backside one piece, an' I go to keep it one piece. Uhn, uhn! No, ma'am!"

Hammond, having eaten his supper, opened the door to summon his slave. "You been cryin'. Whut ail you?" he asked, guiding the boy before him, his hand on his shoulder.

"She bash me. That black nigger bash me. I never do nuffin'," alleged Meg, thrusting forward his lips.

"Reckon you lay claim to it. Save me the moil," the master dismissed the charge. "She baited you, didn't she? That's enough."

The boy admitted that he had been fed.

For want of something to do, Hammond wandered out upon the wooden sidewalk beneath the wooden awning, and looked to right and left. He saw nothing except a Negro girl driving to pasture a cow followed by its calf.

The owner of the hotel had dragged a chair out upon the sidewalk and sat on the small of his back, his legs extended. "Make your boy pull you out a chair and be at home. Too early to go in," he said. "Nice weather."

"Right nice. Warmin' some," Hammond agreed. He hesitated and then commanded Meg to fetch a chair for him. He sat in it and told the boy to remove his boots, which had begun to chafe his feet. That done, Meg sat on the edge of the sidewalk.

"Come fur?" asked the hotel owner.

"From over around Benson. My papa's plantation."

"Planter, huh? Knowed you was gen'leman o' some kind, your rig an' good span an' spruce nigger an' all. Got otherns too, I reckon."

Hammond admitted to having other slaves.

"Cotton in?"

"All planted," Hammond said.

"Been purty wet around. Plantin' late here."

"Reckon you know Richard Woodford, don't you? Readin' law." It was late enough for Hammond to inquire.

"Dick, you mean? Ol' Major's boy. Yes, was readin', I believe. Ain't here no more."

"Ain't?"

"Gone back. Taken up preacherin', I hearn say. Went religious. Wild like. Guess the wild ones makes the best reverends. Well set up an' right clever, only ain't got no sense."

"I hadn't heard. He my brother-in-law, goin' to be."

"Weddin' your sister? That good. Settle him down."

"No, I marryin' hisn—Major Woodford's gal, her mother a Hammond. I'm on my way to git her now."

"I see, I see. Good fam'ly. 'Bout the best fam'ly in the county," the hotel owner opined. "Gentry. I seen you gentry, first thing. Major hard pressed though. 'Bout bust. Lived too high. Had ever'thing an' ain't got nothin'. Crowfoot blistered an' all his drove of niggers. That is, 'lessen you goin' to save him?" He raised his voice to make the last statement only tentatively a question, to be answered or not as his guest pleased

"I reckon his trouble eased off some," said Hammond.

"His youngest boy run away. Don' know whure he gone. An' now the oldest turnin' preacher. Right hard on the ol' man."

"Charles come back," Hammond informed the man. "He was over with me, visitin'."

"Hadn't hearn it," said the hotel man. "I git 'most ever'thin', but not that. Hadn't hearn."

"Been back around a month, 'bout that. Reckon his papa keepin' him pretty close, after runnin' off."

"My brother, 'bout three miles out, got one, fact two on 'em, he like to git shet of. Reckon you ain't buyin' none, though?" the hotel owner changed the subject.

"Whut?"

"Niggers. Reckoned you'd know."

"Place full of 'em," said Hammond.

"Not in'erested, huh? These of my brother, right good. Mustees. Young mustees. Big, sound, young mustees."

"Ain't got no money nohow. Not along with me," said Hammond.

"That don't matter, I reckon, you goin' to wed a Woodford—not that the Woodford credit good, but the family. Sime would take your note-of-hand, three or six months. You're gen'leman, anybody kin see."

"Last thing I'm a-wantin'—more niggers," Hammond declared without

conviction either to his hearer or to himself. "Mustees? An' sound?"

"An' cheap. Sime got to git shet of 'em an' won't sell to no trader. Traders comin' through an' a-wantin' 'em all the time. Sime won't sell. They hisn, his own, his own git, an' he wants 'em a good place, wants to know whure they goin'."

"Cain't use 'em," Hammond sighed, "I don't reckon. Comin' fall, after cotton, I'd look at 'em." The slaves for sale were a sorry lot for the greater part, and yet it was only by seeing what were offered that the Maxwells were enabled to recruit an occasional addition to the Falconhurst menage.

"Pay after cotton. That all right. Sime don't need money. Whut he need is shet of them bucks. His wife, his new wife, cain't abide 'em, 'cause they hisn. Starvin' 'em an' a-makin' him whup 'em, an' complainin,' an' raisin' hell ever' minute. Right good to his black 'uns, but not to these. Threats to leave him, an' he don't sell 'em off."

"How big they?" Hammond could not contain his interest. "Not that I wantin' 'em."

"Oh, one is almost growed, fifteen or sixteen, big, seventeen hands, more or less. The othern is the wench's second, 'bout fourteen, thereabouts. An' white hided, white as I be, 'ceptin' the eyes. Black eyes. Sime's got black eyes. Couldn't hardly tell but by the finger nails an' around the roots of the hair. Nigger come out there."

"White one runs, you cain't never ketch him," Ham objected. "Course, ourn don't never run."

"Business slow or I'd buy 'em, my own self, jest to help Sime out. Course, he want 'em out an' gone, clean out of the country—leastwise his woman do. Don' know whut I'd do with 'em. Sell again, I reckon, I gits a price."

"I ain't marketin' fer niggers, gittin' married and all. Wouldn't drive a lady in a rig full of foreign niggers."

"These—nobody goin' to know they niggers, 'lessen told, they that human. Better look 'em over. I'll send in the mornin'. Jackson's boy across at the livery kin ride out an' bring Sime in. No bother—boy ain't doin' no work after he feed your mares, an' Jack don't keer an' I use him."

"I reckon not; I gotten to git along," Hammond faltered. "Time to go in," he said, rising and turning his back on the temptation. "Come along here, Meg. Quilt on the floor? Don' want he should dirty his clothes."

It was also bedtime for the hotel man, but he continued to sit, waiting for the hostler slave who was late in his return to the stable where he slept. As he came slouching down the road the hotel man called him over to him and sat up. "You knowin' whure at Mista Sime Maddox live?"

The Negro waved his arm in a generally southern direction, and answered, "Yas, suh. He live out there, way out. You goes an' goes an' then you turns this a-way, Masta, suh. You kin ast along as you goes."

"I ain't a-goin'. You is," explained the white man. "I wants you should git there at sunup; not no later. Tell Mista Sime to come right quick an'

fetch along them two white bucks to sell em. Un'erstan'? Fetch along the two bucks an' drop ever'thin' an' come."

The Negro scratched the back of his head. "Gen'eman wantin' his team first thing. Cain't—"

"I tell you to start early, an' not harness that team until I says. Let them hosses alone. Hear?"

"I hearin', Masta, suh. But Masta Jackson, he say—"

"You back here 'fore Jackson stirrin'. I tell him I send you."

"An them patter-rollers. They gits me—"

"Patter-rollers in bed that time of mornin'. But I writes you out a pass. Ride that wall-eye Rose; don' need no saddle. An' moon-down ain't too early. Sleep tomorrer." The man rose, made his way into the hotel, where he rummaged in a drawer under the counter of what served him for a desk, and returned with a thin pad of ruled paper, the stub of a pencil, and a pair of spectacles. He resumed his chair and rocked it toward the edge of the unpaved sidewalk to obtain the benefit of the moonlight on his tablet, adjusted his spectacles and poised his pencil above the paper. "Now whut you goin' fer; whut you goin' to tell Mista Sime Maddox? Reckon I better write that too?"

"Naw, suh. I knows. I tell that white gen'man, 'please, suh, Masta Eph Maddox crave you come to hotel, an' fetch along them bucks you sellin', suh. White gen'man goin' to buy 'em, you gits to Briarfield in time.' That right, ain't it, suh?"

"That right, only tell him hurrah, 'cause man won't wait. An' don't lose this pass I'm writin'. Any patter-roller kotch you up, show it to him. Ain't no danger though."

The man pondered as he wrote painfully and deliberately: "This boy is going to Simon Maddox he is all rite to leaf him goe & come (signed) Ephraim Maddox." He folded the pass and gave it to the slave who, having no pockets, shoved it in his shirt. Maddox, fearing that it would be lost, went into the hotel, got a pin and, demanding the note back, affixed the document to the boy's shirt.

Hammond stirred early and was annoyed by the lateness of breakfast, which the landlord had ordered postponed. He was even more vexed at the failure of his team to be ready for him and at his inability to find the groom.

The landlord accepted the settlement of the guest's score, and explained, "He due now, any minute. He have your hosses right ready, quick when he git here. He gone fer me out to my brother to tell him to fetch them mustees fer you to see."

"I tol' you I not buyin' no niggers," protested Hammond. "Whut fer you send? Whut I wants—my team hitched."

"Jest wants you should see 'em. Might know somebody—," Maddox said persuasively. "Never reckoned you'd buy; but you kin look, cain't you?" He eased himself complacently into a chair, while Hammond limped to the

door, looked down the road, and returned to wait.

"Ain't another boy around, or somebody, kin fix my rig?" Hammond asked after what seemed to him a prolonged delay. The ball of the sun was completely above the horizon. "Nev' mir' feedin', I feed 'em when I gits there."

"He comin'," announced Meg from the sidewalk. "Somebody comin' on a hoss, Masta, suh."

"Like, it that white man. Nigger laggin' back, likely," Hammond addressed himself to nobody in particular but made his way toward the door.

But the horseman Meg had seen had been the slave with two other riders on the wall-eyed horse that clopped into the stable. Two ragged and bewildered urchins slid to the ground and, after the Negro had tied the horse in a stall, followed him across the road to the hotel.

"I tol' you I wanted my rig first thing," Hammond met the slave. "I goin' to lay on your back my own self. Nev' min' feedin'; hitch my hosses."

"Yas, suh; yas, suh," acknowledged the Negro confidently. "Masta Eph, suh, he send me. Masta Eph, he say go. I gits your hosses, suh, yes suh, right away. Ain't it, suh, Masta Eph?"

"Whure Mista Sime? I tol' you to fetch him," interrupted the hotel keeper.

"Yas, suh; I tol' him, yas, suh, Masta. Masta Sime down, a-shakin', ager. He too sick-like. Sen' these here bucks; say you sell 'em, suh," the tall Negro explained. "Miz Sime, she say tell you sell 'em. She goin' to chop 'em up, she say, they come back—chop 'em up. An' she mean it; she goin' ter. She say sell 'em, sell 'em sure."

The two boys were indifferent to the threat. They stood in the weeds beyond the sidewalk, dazed by the unwonted scene, the younger clinging as best he was able to the pantaloons of the elder. The whiteness of their flesh was not apparent through the tan and the dirt of their faces. The similarity of their features and their eyes, so black that they appeared to have no pupils, proclaimed their kinship.

"There they air, jest like I say, soun', likely young mustees. Whut you say? You hearn whut Sime's woman say? Say sell 'em," the landlord expounded.

Hammond stepped off the sidewalk and ran his hand casually over both boys, opened their mouths and felt of their teeth. "Skinny," was his estimate. He sensed a bargain.

"Starved, I reckon. That woman—Sime ain't done it. They kin fatten. Right stalwart."

"How much he wantin', you reckon?" Ham was interested enough to inquire, but without show of enthusiasm.

"That biggern ought to bring seven hunert," the salesman estimated. "The othern four fifty or five." Then seeing Ham's lack of interest, he added, "Ten

hunert fer the both of 'em. Ten hunert an' take 'em along. Sime will be mad, but you kin have 'em."

"Whut you standin' there fer?" Hammond turned to the tall hostler. "Ready my team. Better feed 'em first; it gittin' so late."

The Negro acknowledged the order with a "Yas, suh; yas, suh," and slouched off, looking over his shoulder at the traders.

"Had ought to be worth that much, anyways; but how much you give? You hear Sime's wife. I don' dast carry 'em back."

"I ain't offerin', but at five hunert fer the two on 'em, I'll look at 'em; look at 'em, mind. I don't want 'em—not honestly." Hammond proposed with apparent indifference. He looked at the feet of the larger boy and thought that he saw a crooked toe. "Lift up," he said, grasping the youth by the leg. The boy steadied himself on his brother's shoulder, while the white man examined the toe and found that the defect he had suspected was only dirt.

"Tell you whut," countered Maddox. "Seven fifty fer the span, an' that's givin' 'em. Any dealer will plank down more."

"Let dealer have 'em. Thought your brother didn't want dealers."

"He don't; but I don' care. I'm sellin' 'em. They his git, ain't mine."

"That nigger of Major Woodford's slothy. All his hands like that? No won'er he goin' bust." Maddox saw in Hammond's impatience with the hostler a threat to his trade, as Hammond had intended he should.

"We'll split. Whut say we split? Six twenty-five? Halfway between five an' seven fifty?" Maddox bargained. "Two mustees fer six hunert an' a quarter. You stealin' 'em."

"Not at that price, I ain't. I don' wants the scrawny varmints, noways. Might look at 'em, come fall, an' you fattens 'em. Not now."

"An' Sime's wife got to feed 'em, they not livin' come fall," Maddox conceded that the boys were undernourished. "Well, an' you won't give more, you got me over a barrel," Maddox sighed. "I reckon I takes up your offer."

"I ain't made no offer, 'cept lookin' at 'em. They spry an' soun', I might go five hunderd." Hammond was immersed in the negotiations, more interested in driving a bargain than in being married tomorrow.

"Tell that nigger over there to bring me a buggy whip," Maddox instructed Meg. "I spry 'em up a little."

"Please, suh, Masta. I be spry. Don' whup me. Whut want me to do?" the older youth spoke for the first time.

"Don't need no whup," Hammond seconded. "I don' want to see 'em under the whup. Any nigger spry gittin' whupped. I wants 'em natchel." He had made up his mind to buy the young mustees if he found no serious blemish in them. His only doubt was that he might find an excuse to knock another fifty dollars from the price, which seemed doubtful.

"Wants me run an' jump?" asked the older boy, encouraged by the white man's moderation, evidently having been examined before.

"Wants you to stay right in your britches," replied the buyer. He kicked

a stone from the roadway and, picking it up, hurled it with all his strength. "Now, fetch."

The boy bounded away and retrieved the stone with agility. "Jump," commanded Hammond and the boy lunged awkwardly into the air three times.

"Now the othern," said Hammond, throwing the stone again. The smaller boy dashed forward, throwing himself from side to side in his determination to show his speed; but, in his haste and anxiety to excel his brother, he fell and lacerated his knee. He was forced by the injury to limp back with the stone, expecting some punishment which he did not receive.

Instead, Hammond bent and examined the knee. "Ain't nothin'," he opined. "Now, jump an' you kin. Jump high."

The boy did his best, but could not surmount the injury.

"He kin jump, jump good. Jest a-playin' off," Maddox believed that the deal had failed. "Tell that nigger, fetch me here that whup."

"Nev' min'. He tryin'," Hammond excused the boy. "I got a bad leg, my own self. Let's take 'em inside or over in the barn. I wants to shuck 'em, see ifn they ruptured or anything."

Maddox led the way into the hotel and in the office instructed the boys to remove their clothes. The older kicked his way out of his pants and took off his shirt. Once naked himself, he tore the garments from his brother's body. The skin of the parts that had been covered was white with the ivory whiteness which their black eyes betokened, but there was nothing of the African about them. The color of their torsos and thighs was in strong contrast to that of their sunburned faces, necks, and lower legs.

"Ugly, ain't they? Them shiny bellies, lookin' like worms. It ain't healthy," shuddered Hammond. "An' skinny hammed, like a damned hopper-grass." However, he explored the bodies, lifted the genitals, punched the groins, ran his hand down the spine of the elder, spread the cheeks of the buttocks in search of hemorrhoids. A few coarse hairs had begun to grow on the chest of the elder boy, and Hammond pulled at them. "Funny, ain't it, hairs on a young nigger?"

"It's that human blood," said Maddox. "Don't hurt nothin'. Kin pull it out."

"Few years, have as many as I got; an' don' want nobody pullin' mine."

"Whure your manners, boy?" the vendor prompted. "Tell the white gen'leman you cravin' he goin' to buy you. Tell him you strong. Tell him you min' everythin' he say, an' not eat much an' work good. Tell him. Tell him. Tell him an' mean it, 'cause an' he don' buy you, you goin' to wish he had, your ass goin' to sting so bad. Now, git yourself sol'."

The boy made a tentative beginning to commend his own virtues, when Hammond cut him short. "Nev' min'; nev' min'," he said. "I don' care whuther you craves buyin' an' I sees you ain't vig'ous now. Ain't et. You goin' to eat, an' you goin' to work, an' you goin' to mind, an' if I gits you. Ain't goin' to have no say." He brushed his hands together, sat down, and

extended his arm for the younger boy, who approached within reach.

"He littler, but he fatter rumped an' more vig'ous. That knee scab over. Won't know nothin' 'bout it afore mornin'," Maddox commented meaninglessly, with nervous anxiety.

"Know somethin' 'bout this back, though. This boy bin thresh; snake seem like," said Hammond, rubbing the vertical welts across the boy's back in a futile effort to erase them. The wounds were superficial and the skin had not been broken. "I 'ont want no snaked up nigger. Our backs all clean at Falconhurst. I 'on't want no nigger that got to be snaked. Whut you do, boy? Whut that snakin' fer?"

The boy looked at him in frightened silence, and Hammond repeated the question, shaking the child's shoulders. The boy opened his mouth as if to speak and broke into tears.

The older boy sought to answer the question. "Stealin', stealin' pone. Ol' Miz say he eat too much, an' make Masta Sime snake him."

"Who ast you?" Hammond silenced him. "Talk when you ast! Put on your clothes—ain't more than rags—both of you. Got names?"

"Yas, suh, Masta," the boy answered the question as succinctly as possible.

"Well?"

"I, Ace, suh, Masta; he name Trump."

"Good as any," said Hammond.

"Reckoned you'd want 'em, once you see 'em," Maddox sought to make the deal final. "That back heal up; week, two weeks, won't know it."

"You say you take my note till I git home an' kin send it? On'y got sixty dollars gold with me I kin spare," Hammond counted his cash and the vendor accepted the terms.

"Got to leave 'em here until I comes back, married. Cain't git married with a carriage full of bucks."

"Gotten to charge you though," specified the innkeeper. "That size eats, an' these two starved. Ain't Sime; he'd feed. It's his woman."

"You warrants to keep 'em. They new an' might run. You 'sponsible."

"I spancels 'em to the bedpost. Not runnin' an' I feeds 'em good," promised the innkeeper.

"An' wash 'em? Ain't there nobody to wash 'em? They right nasty. That nigger 'cross the road would nasty 'em worse. That wench in the kitchen. Cain't she wash 'em?"

"Worth a dime I reckon—a dime apiece, each," Maddox itemized. He opened the door and called, "Marth, you Marth."

"Make your papers, suh," said Hammond.

"I don' know about makin' papers. Kin you do it? I'll sign. Lawyer Rogers will fer half a dollar, an' you cain't."

"I kin, I reckon, good enough," said Hammond. "Cain't write right plain, but you kin read it."

When Marth appeared at the door, Maddox assigned her task. "Wash them two bucks," he said. "Wash 'em good. You kin han'le 'em one at a time. Call Fred, an' you got to hold 'em. Ain't never been washed, I reckon."

"I wash 'em clean. Wool long; need cuttin' off," suggested the woman.

"That hair, not wool; white-like hair. I speck gen'leman want it left, oncet it clean."

"Leave it," instructed Ham, "but git it clean. You got soap?"

"Sof' soap an' hot water gits 'em so clean they won't smell none fer a month." Marth grabbed Ace by the neck and propelled him before her, and Trump she held at arm's length by his shoulder.

"An' burn they rags. I buyin' 'em new," Hammond called after her.

"Gol' buttons on 'em?" Marth asked and received no answer.

"Git your writin' things an' let's see kin I write out them papers, whiles she washes 'em," suggested Hammond. "Might as well git it over."

Maddox produced the pad and small pencil that he had used the previous night and pushed them across the counter. Hammond tore off a sheet of the paper and wet the pencil in his mouth, studying how to begin.

While he was writing, or preparing to write, a tall man, all in black, his long legs dangling from a big-footed, ewe-necked, gray gelding, stopped before the door and startled Hammond, deep in his concentration, with a booming voice calling, "Brother Maddox, Brother Maddox, come out, suh, please suh."

"It's the reverend. Jest the man. He'll write it. He kin write good," Maddox said, hastening to the door. "Mornin', Reverend. Look right spry. Git down, git down," he greeted the preacher.

"I tol'able, all right, but your brother ain't. Rode by to tell you. Jest come back from prayin' with him. Sister Sime she sent and wanted me to come, an' I'm right glad I went. I hates to tell you, but I afeared he ain't goin' to make it. Ager and bloody flux together. Purty low, but at peace with God. Made his peace, this time."

"Sime ben low before. Reckon he pull through, but I'm obliged, mighty obliged to you, Reverend. I'll go out today an' if I kin; tomorrow shore. I had ought to go."

"You had ought to," the preacher echoed Maddox.

"But git down, Reverend," Maddox insisted. "We makin' papers an' don't know how. You kin write good."

"Don't know as I got the time and Sunday tomorrer. Sermon to fix," explained the preacher. "Oh, well. I kin make it up as I goes along, ifn I got the Spirit. Better a good deed than a good sermon anyways. How am I goin' to help you out? What is it?" He dismounted, hitched his horse, and followed the host into the hotel.

"This Mista Maxwell, Reverend Jones," Maddox introduced the presumed strangers. "Mista Maxwell and me—"

"I recollec' Mista Maxwell," declared Jones extending his hand. "You

the gen'leman come with Miz Blanche to service oncet. Talk goin' around awhile how you goin' to marry Miz Blanche—that is afore you took her brother away with you."

"That whut I doin' here now, a-marryin' Miz Blanche," explained Hammond.

"Sho' 'nough? Hadn't heared—not lately. Ain't been to Crowfoot, an' Miz Woodford so deef she don' come to service. Whut an' all, Dick a-gittin' saved an' goin' into the cloth, we ain't so friendly-like no more. I glad Dick saved, all right; but he tryin' to git my church. He cain't; congregation won't trust him. But him a-tryin' ain't Christ-like, ain't Christian."

"Now, these here papers—," Maddox interrupted.

"You wants I should write 'em out legal?" asked Jones.

"If you please, suh; if you please," said Maddox and explained the details of the transaction. "I don't know nothin' 'bout Mista Maxwell, but he a gen'leman, anybody kin see by his rig and body servant an' all. I am goin' to take his note-of-hand till he kin git home an' sen' the money."

Jones laughed uproariously and slapped his lean thigh. "Trus' Mista Maxwell?" he laughed. "Trust him fer ten thousand. Know who Mista Maxwell is? Got acres on acres an' niggers on niggers. He rich. Major Woodford tol' me all about Mista Maxwell—mother a Hammond an' all. He'll sen' it. He send the money. He got it—pots of it."

Maddox sighed with reassurance, nodded his head, and said, "I had reckoned."

"Right glad, right glad, Brother Simon riddin' of them two," declared the preacher with unction. "Don't make no difference, him not gittin' no price. Gittin' shet of 'em whut counts. Don' look well havin' 'em round about, favorin' him so much anybody would know whure he got 'em. Great blessin' to Sister Sime havin' 'em gone, gone clean away. They a great plague to Sister Sime. She couldn't abide 'em, but havin' to feed 'em an' pray fer 'em. Right hard."

"Sime 'tatched to 'em, though," sighed Maddox. "He cherished 'em."

"I know; but they goin' to Mista Maxwell will comfort him. I buried their maw fer him—a big, stout, bright yaller wench. A loss. Jest been offered eight hunderd fer her an' wouldn't sell when she up an' dies. Best thing, howsumever, gittin' rid of temptation. Had a funeral, preachin' an' ever'thing. Paid me fer preachin' it. Now, Sime, hisself, a-goin'."

"But them papers—," Hammond interrupted the maudlin reminiscence.

"They easy. Take here." Jones assumed the pencil from Hammond's hand and drew the paper toward him. He wrote slowly in a crabbed but legible hand:

"Briarfield Courthouse
"May 7, 1832

"For one dollar and other valuable emolument as agent and surrogate

for my brother Simon Maddox of near this place I sell assign and warrant the title to Mr."

"What your name? First name?" he lifted his head to ask Hammond.

"Hammond Maxwell," he continued writing, "of two (2) light complected African servants—to wit Ace about 15 and Trump about 13 maybe 14 sound and sane in wind and limb and slaves for life."

He passed the document to Maddox. "Sign here," he said. "Card names. I don' even like to write them gamblin' words. Sime usen to play cards an' carry on, though he saved now. You goin' to change them names, Brother Maxwell? I would."

Maddox adjusted his glasses and slowly read what Jones had written. He nodded his head and affixed his signature, remarking, "I don' know all them words, but it all right."

Jones began to write the promissory note, and, without asking, included interest at twelve percent. When he had finished, Hammond added his signature and passed the note to Maddox.

"I don' like this part about Simon. It had ought to say 'Eph,' I reckon; that is 'Ephraim'," opined Maddox. "Course I goin' to give Sime the money—ifn he live. But with him a-dyin' an' that woman, no kin, don't you think?"

"I'll change it, an' you say. How you want it!" conceded Jones.

"Mark Sime out an' put in Eph in your writin'. Saves trouble." Maddox turned the paper around and shoved it toward Jones, who scratched out one name and inserted the other above it.

Hammond delved into his leather poke and shoved three twenty dollar pieces across the counter. "That makes it!" he said.

"All 'ceptin' the washin' of 'em an' the feedin'. You kin pay that when you takes 'em away."

"Whure at you got them boys of Sime's? Over at the livery? I'd kinder like to see 'em once more," the preacher said, "seein' as I saved their souls."

"Marth a-cleanin' 'em, out in the kitchen. They hisn now," said Maddox.

Hammond led the way.

The white men found the black Negro woman on her fat knees beside a washtub in which Ace stood patiently, lathered from his voluminous hair to his calves where they entered the water, while Marth with a piece of what had been his shirt scrubbed his legs and muttered about the dirt in the water. "This the second soapin', suh," she said. "An' I got to do it agin. Never see young 'uns this filthy like, yas filthy. Filth jes cake on 'em, suh. Please suh, look over that othern see if I got him clean. I scours him agin, an' you says, in clean water."

Trump stood turning himself and drying in the heat of the fireplace when Hammond went over to inspect the woman's handiwork. The master felt of the warm flesh and stretched it. He raised first the skinned knee and then the unscarred one. He held the unresistant boy by the arm and sought with the heel of his palm to erase the marks of the whip on the boy's back. "He

all right. That good," was his verdict, "savin' you might scrape under his toes an' cut his nails."

"That 'un not so dirty like this big 'un," said Marth. "Finish him in two waters."

"Not as ol'," Maddox explained the phenomenon.

Jones gingerly touched Ace's rump with his forefinger, as if to ascertain whether the whiteness were natural or merely painted. "Couldn't hardly tell he weren't white," he commented.

"Not that part," Hammond conceded.

"Please, suh, Masta, suh," the black woman addressed herself to Hammond hesitantly, " 'tain't my put in an' I knows it, on'y this white-like boy good, right biddable, ain't goin' to make no trouble, none at all."

"Reckon not," the master agreed.

"Please suh, don' go choppin' him with no blacksnake like you done that 'un." Marth nodded toward Meg who had retreated into a corner at the entrance of the white man. "Ruin a nigger, go to sell it."

"Like I done—? Whut you been talkin', boy? Whut you been sayin'? That I snake you?"

"He say you doin' it mos' ever' week, suh. He say his back all scab right now. He been skearin' this 'un here in the tub till he shakin' o' skear. Ain't you snake him?"

"Ain't; but I goin' to, he don' stop his lyin'. Snake only thing cure him. Jes' nigger talk. Don't you be skeared, Ace, o' no snake—'lessen you needs it. Jes' ack right an' mind."

"I ain't," said the boy, brushing the soap from his eyes and blinking.

"Ain't whut?"

"Ain't skeared."

"Ain't skeared, whut?"

"I ain't skeared, Masta, suh."

"That better. Don' never fergit that 'masta suh' an' you doesn't want no snake," his new owner warned.

"That right," said Maddox. "Breakin' 'em right in. Sime never teached 'em no manners. They bein' hisn—"

"Let's all kneel down an' pray fer these pore boys," said the preacher, falling to his knees, "torn from they home an' a-goin' into a fur lan', pray that they goin' to serve their new master an' obey his wishes, like he obey his Masta in heaven. I feels like it, feels jest like prayer. All kneel." He leaned forward to place his hands on the edge of the washtub and bowed his head on his hands.

Maddox, unable to escape, creaked to his knees, and Hammond steadied himself on a table as he sank awkwardly to one knee and extended his stiff leg painfully behind him.

Marth pulled her spread legs together, struck Ace's shin with the edge of her palm and admonished him to get down. His lank, soap-sodden hair

still dripped upon the drying lather on his body as he fell upon his knees in the tub, splashing the soiled water into Jones' face. The woman looked over her shoulder at the boy on the hearth already upon his knees. "Bow down yo' haid and shut yo' eyes. That good," she said. Ace's eyes were already closed to shut out the soap and his head already bowed to keep the hair from his face.

Meg, uncertain whether he was to be included in this unwonted ceremony, and fearing to soil his stockings by kneeling, merely squatted, one open eye upon his master for sign of disapproval.

"Oh, Lord God, oh, Almighty God, oh," the preacher began his exhortation, punctuating it with interjection. "We come to Thee, oh, in a humble spirit, oh, with simple and contrite hearts, oh. We ast Your blessings, oh, upon these poor servants, oh, borned to serve they masta, oh, as we borned to serve Thee, oh. Oh God, oh, make 'em obey, oh, they masta, oh; make 'em strive, oh, an' work, oh, an' labor, oh, to do whut he goin' to command 'em, oh. Make 'em humble, oh, to bow theirself down to him, oh, liken we bows ourself down, oh, before Thee, oh; make 'em un'erstan' that he goin' to be they god on earth, oh, jes' like Thee art our God in heaven, oh, to do like he a-wantin' 'em to, oh. Make 'em to bear their lot, oh, bein' servants, oh, jest like we got to bear our lot, oh, bein' masta, oh. An', oh God, they masta got to chastise 'em, oh, an' to flog 'em, oh, make 'em to bear it, oh, to stan' up under it, oh, in a-knowin' it for they own good, oh, an' that the whup a-hurtin' the masta more than it hurt the servant, oh.

"These servants, oh, Lord, they goin' in a fur country, oh, afur off, oh, away from the scenes of they chil'hood, oh, away from they ol' masta, oh, an' they ol' mist'ess, oh, who been so good, oh, an' taken sich care of 'em, oh, an' who learned 'em reverence, oh, an' obedience, oh, who learned 'em to know the right, oh, an' to do the right, oh, an' who brought 'em to Thee, oh, an' give they spirit, oh, into Thy keeping, oh. Make 'em go on, oh, in reverence, oh, and obedience, oh, a-knowin' the right an' a-doin' the right, oh, an' a-bowin' down before Thee, oh, an' a-worshippin' Thee, oh, through they masta, a-servin' Thee, oh.

"Things goin' to be different fer 'em, oh. They knows it, oh. Things goin' to be different. We knows it, oh, an' You knows it, oh. Ain't a-goin' to be easy, oh. These saplin's goin' to be cold, oh, an' they goin' to go hongry, oh. They belly goin' to groan, oh; they back goin' to ache; they goin' to feel the whup on they hide, oh, like unto scorpions, oh. They knows it, oh God; they knows it. Help 'em, Oh God, to bear it, oh.

"An' bless they new masta, oh, Oh God, bless him. Bless Mista Maxwell, oh—that his name, oh. He a fine gen'leman an' a kin' masta, oh, to his servants, oh. Bless him, Lord, oh, an' make him bear with these his servants, like You bearin' with him, oh, Make him jest, oh, jest like You jest. Make him forbear to smite them, jest like You forbearin' to smite him, oh."

If Deity was heeding Jones' instruction, his human listeners were heed-

ing more the increasing discomfort of their postures. Hammond's leg, stretched behind him, was beginning to ache; Maddox was presently comfortable enough, but doubted, if an end should ever come, that he should be able to rise again. Marth's weight upon her upright thighs went unnoticed, so impressed was she with the spirit of the prayers, although she failed, despite her attention to the words, to attach to them their meaning.

Ace shivered in the tub, while Trump once reached behind him to shield his back from the heat that poured upon it. Both knew that the invocation pertained to them, a magic spell cast in their behalf, but its contents lost upon them. Meg, in a hysteria of solemnity, permitted his eyes to sneak in the direction of the preacher and suppressed a giggle with his palm to his mouth. He still was not sure that he had any part in the proceedings, but wanted to be included, expected immediate results from the preacher's mandate and was disappointed that they were not palpable.

Jones' robust voice did not flag. The vocal punctuation of his sentences enabled him to inhale before his breath was exhausted. There was no cause for him to pause. He was used to jack-knifing his legs and bending his shoulders and was unaware of any discomfort of his own or of his audience. Lost in the frenzy of his communion with his Maker, he was as insensible of space and duration as the spheres in their progress. The rhythm of his sonorous chant was hypnotic and Hammond lost all sense of meaning of the discourse as it wandered from benediction to benediction, upon Maddox, the Maddox House, and upon Marth; upon the Woodfords, and upon the marriage of Blanche to Hammond, upon Dick's ministry, Beatrix's hearing, the Major's crops and servants.

Nor was God permitted to overlook Meg, who cocked his ears at the mention of Mr. Maxwell's little servant with the gold buttons on his coat. God was invoked to deliver him from his proclivity to prevaricate to the end that he should not boil and sizzle in hell, the details of which were described with such vividness that the boy shuddered in his fear and resolved to speak naught but truth thenceforth. Therein, for the nonce at least, the prayer was answered.

Allusion was made to Simon Maddox's malady, and God was called upon to quiet his chills, to reduce his fever, and to mitigate his bloody diarrhea. It was inferred that such visitations were in retribution for Simon's sins, specifically for his alliance with the mother of Ace and Trump and above all, for the names he had given them derived from his devotion to seven-up. God was assured of the sick man's repentance and besought to admit him to His joy.

Items various and sundry followed, and at long last the paean concluded with an impassioned coda of praise and thanks, "in the precious name of Jesus Christ, oh. Amen."

The preacher continued to kneel, too exhausted by his passion to get to his feet. Nobody saw fit to gainsay anything that he had said, because nobody remembered. All were impressed by his fervor; the manner of his ex-

hortation had overweighed its matter.

Hammond and Maddox struggled upright, rubbing their joints; Trump, quite dry, retreated from the fire. Martha remained on her knees, but paused to flex her back and to sigh, before she began again to squeeze water from the washcloth over the dried soap of the boy's back. The process was too slow and, holding by the edge of the tub, she climbed stiffly to her feet and stumbled to the water bucket from which she lifted the drinking gourd and returned with it to the tub, dipping the soiled water over Ace's head and torso.

"Ain't he purty an' clean—an' white 'most?" she appealed to the preacher for commendation of her achievement, as she lifted the boy upright and steadied him, blinded by his wet hair, to step from the tub. She dragged the tub to the door and tipped the dirty water from it, returned it and refilled it from a kettle off the fire and from the water bucket to modify the heat of the water. With her bare foot she kicked into the flame a leg of Ace's pants that had fallen on the hearth, smoldered at one end, but failed to burn.

The white men went back into the front part of the hotel, Hammond taking Meg with him.

Hammond asked of Jones, "How much, makin' them papers? I reckon Mista Maddox here goin' to pay half."

"Oh, that? Why, nothin' I reckon, nothin' at all, not a cent. They ain't no charge," Jones laughed in disparagement of his accommodation. "I bein't no lawyer, although the papers all right. They'll hold."

"Mighty kind of you, an' we're obligated; I am leastwise," Hammond acknowledged. "Willin' to pay."

"I knowed the reverend wouldn't charge. Reason I didn't say nothin'," said Maddox, hitching his trousers by his hands in his pockets.

"Nothin' fer the papers, at all," Jones repeated. "Of course, an' you want to give somethin', a little somethin', fer the prayer—I'm a preacher, an' I kin take somethin' fer that. No chargin' though. No obligation, 'lessen you seein' it that way."

Hammond took out his purse and hesitated. He didn't know how much was expected, realized he was being lavish, when he pressed a five dollar gold piece into the preacher's hand. Jones was disappointed, believing the coin to be a silver quarter. He had expected four bits, at least, or even a dollar.

When he opened his hand and saw that the coin was yellow, his eyes widened. "All this? This is too much," he remonstrated. "You meanin' I keep it all?"

"That prayin' worth it. Right earnes'. I allow I don' set much store by prayin', but I ain't hearin' it like yourn."

"God listen, all right. He mind whut we says," affirmed Jones confidently. "An' He don' do like we ast, there's a reason; it ain't fer our good. That's whut; ain't fer our good. Only this mornin', ridin' along, I ast Him to bring some money, 'cause I a-needin' some. Now, see, here I got it."

"Whure I goin' to git me some britches? Got to cover them bucks," Hammond changed the subject abruptly.

"Don't know kin you git none without makin' 'em. Reckoned you was too fast burnin' their old, but I didn't want to say," said Maddox. "Marth could of washed 'em. They wasn't comin' through."

"Arkwright, he got 'em; Arkwright's General Store got anything," suggested Jones. "Course, they plain an' common. Cain't git 'em like this buck here got on."

"Mayhap Arkwright have," conceded the hotel man.

"I go with you. I'll show you," Jones volunteered. "Jest aroun' on the main road. I got to stop by the tavern anyways; got to pray with Wagner 'bout that fightin', got to try to stop it."

"Nigger fightin'?" asked Hammond, interested.

"Ever' Satiday. Be fightin' this afternoon, 'lessen Wagner listens to God. I been a-prayin' an' prayin'. Gamblin'! Gen'lemen a-gamblin' little niggers. That's whut fightin' lead to—gamblin'. Wagner and them make out how it improve the niggers, but it nothin' but gamblin'."

As Hammond went out the door with the preacher, he saw his surrey at the hitching post across the road, ready for him. He had become so engrossed with his purchases that he had forgotten his trip to Crowfoot. But Ace and Trump must have clothes. There was small choice between the roughness of the road and the weeds that margined it. The men chose the weeds, but Hammond sent Meg into the open, lest the weeds should spoil his stockings.

Three loungers dangled their legs from the high porch upon which stood a dusty display of churns, grindstones, and plows; and Hammond felt their eyes upon him in the belief that they discussed his lameness. They were in fact looking at Meg, in an ambivalence of admiration of and contempt for his dress.

"Some folks cain't venture abroad withoutn they takes along a dress-up nigger to wipe they ass fer 'em," scorned one man, emitting a stream of tobacco directed at a stone in the street. It fell short of its target.

"Shoes on, an' buttons an' all," observed a second.

"Spiles 'em; makes 'em uppity. First thing you know there's a rapin'. I wouldn't never risk it—dressin' one up," said the first man.

" 'Cause you ain't got none, and ain't a-goin' nowhures," said the third, easing himself to the ground.

"Reckon it some trader?"

"Trader! Gentry! Look at that coat. Traders don' spruce up they niggers."

"Over to the Maddox," said the first man, gesturing with his head. "Team in Jackson's."

Together they strolled into the store, ostensibly to buy a twist of tobacco, really to make further observations of the strangers.

They overheard Jones introduce Hammond to the younger Arkwright, who had come forward to wait upon them. "Brother George," he said, "this

here is Mista Maxwell, stayin' at the Maddox. He gone an' bought a couple of bucks, Sime's mustees, you knows 'em, an' burned they clothes. They nekid."

"Don't wonder," said the brisk young clerk. "Never git 'em clean—last I saw of 'em."

"I wantin' to buy some pants fer 'em an' a shirt," explained Hammond.

"Ain't got whut would suit. Have to see the tailor about fancy wear like that," said Arkwright, looking at Meg.

"No, no. Nothin' like that. Jest osnaberg or drill or somethin' to cover 'em to take 'em home."

"Oh!" said the young man, "that is different." He led the customers through the jungle of varied merchandise, pans and buckets, knives and nails, stoves and plows, bolts of cloth plain and printed, eggs and cheese and beeswax, hams and bacon, tobacco and stick candy in jars, barrels and boxes, from all of which mingled a hundred musty smells. He threw back a black cloth which protected the men's clothing piled high upon a large table. "Most in general folks makes their own. We got plenty of goods. I ain't sure whut we gotten," he made talk.

He thumbed down a pile on the table and pulled a pair of rough, brown breeches from near the bottom. "Them will wear like iron, good an' weighty," his salesmanship ran, as he shoved a hand into the leg to display the material, snapped the waist with all his force to show the strength of the stitching.

Hammond reached for the garment and held it across his belly to gauge its size. "Reckon they about fit that big 'un, mayhap too loose."

"Better big. He bound to grow," put in the preacher, anxious to help the sale.

"A shirt, too," said Hammond, and held it up for size when it was withdrawn. "Arms short. That buck gangly."

"Longest I got," the salesman shrugged.

"Well, an' some littler britches for the othern," said Hammond.

"We ain't got no walnut dyed hickory nigger britches littler than these number threes, have we, Paw?" Arkwright called across the room.

A goat-bearded old man wandered from behind the grocery counter, wiping his hands on the seat of his pants and then pulling his spectacles from his forehead to well down toward the end of his nose, and took charge of the sale. "No; ain't no call fer no smaller than threes," he said. "Skirt-frocks is cheaper an' jest as good till one is big enough fer threes. Git down them skirt-frocks, George."

"No," Hammond protested. "Leave be! Skirt goin' to kick up; won't never do with white lady in the kerridge—kick up an' plague her."

"Ain't got nothin' to show till they big enough fer threes," insisted the old man.

"These has, them mustees of Sime Maddox's," the preacher explained.

"They right heavy. Sime was always a-bulgin' right through his pants, you know."

The elder Arkwright nodded and looked over his glasses. The younger man smiled.

"Mista Maxwell here, he bought 'em, the mustees, an' a-takin' 'em away, clean away."

"Did he now?" said the old man nodding again. "I reckon I'm glad. Sime didn't have no shame about 'em at all."

"Plagued his woman—his last woman," said the preacher. "And Sime too, now he's sick an' repentin'."

"Better take another suit of threes, I s'pose, an' pin 'em up," speculated Ham.

"Galluses. They got buttons fer galluses," George made a happy suggestion which Hammond accepted.

While George went to get them Hammond pulled Meg's arm down from his nose, staggered him with a slap across the face and restored his balance with one from the opposite side. Meg's face wrinkled as if to cry, but he concluded that the blows were condign and silently made apology with downcast eyes.

The elder Arkwright placed his hand on Meg's shoulder and nodded his approval. "Nothin' like learnin' 'em," he said. "Yes, got to learn 'em."

"Tamin' this 'un fer a house nigger—tryin' to," Hammond specified. "Won't never make one—seem like." He paid for the clothes without cavil at the price, gave them unwrapped to Meg, who balanced them on his head. To compensate the young Negro for his punishment, the old man, with more compassion than he had voiced, stepped behind the counter and presented him with a stick of striped candy. The boy looked at the gaudy candy, then at his master.

"Take it, Meg, an' tell the kind gen'leman 'thank you, suh, Masta, suh,' " his master adjured. "Always mind your manners. It's to suck on. Put it in your mouf."

The three men from the porch waited in patience to buy their five cent twist of tobacco and to eavesdrop as best they were able upon the business of the stranger.

"Who that fine gen'man?" asked the first when Arkwright approached to serve them. "Lafe sayin' he a dealer."

"Bought Sime's mustees, didn't he?" said Lafe.

The merchant watched Hammond's difficulty with the steps. "Ain't no dealer," he said. "Why that coat cost money, fifty dollars; and seen his servant? No dealer. Buyin' Sime's boys to raise."

"Look it. They sayin' good-bye," said Lafe from the door. "Preacher Jones stoppin' at Wagner's. Wonder whut he mean."

"Come on. Let's go over."

"Jones ain't a-buyin'. You knows he temp'ance."

"Jest the same—," Arkwright heard from the back of the store.

"Didn't stop at the price," George said to his father. "Could a got more, an' had any sense."

When Hammond and Meg reached the hotel, it was dinner time. Hammond called to Fred to unharness and feed his team. He would order the horses again when he wanted them. The Negro mumbled a "Yas, suh," but with bad grace for his wasted work.

The master discovered his two slaves still in the kitchen gourmandizing from a common pan. They sat face to face on the floor before the fire, their legs spread and their knees propped, with the pan between them, their hands full of victuals, which they were cramming into their mouths as rapidly as they were able to swallow, each fearful that the other would get all of the food. They were like two famished half-grown puppies, who flashed jealous black eyes but were too engrossed to snarl.

Martha stood, akimbo, watching them with satisfaction. She replenished the pan as the boys emptied it of sweet potatoes, fat meat, and corn pone. "Please, Masta, suh, don' bother 'em," she looked at Hammond. "They ain't et today before. They's hongry."

Hammond watched the gluttony. "Don't founder 'em," he cautioned.

The woman chuckled, "Fill 'em, Masta, fill 'em, I says. You feeds good, suh. I knows from this saplin'."

" 'Ceptin' I flogs the meat offn him. His backside in ribbons."

Meg, the new garments still balanced on his head, the stick of candy now short in his mouth, rolled his eyes at his master and looked sheepishly at the floor.

Hammond leaned over to examine Ace's skin to see whether it was clean. The boy raised his arms to protect the sweet potato in one hand, the meat in the other, as his master felt of his back and belly and lifted his leg, forcing the slave to his back in order to make sure the demarcation above the ankle was from sun and not from soil. The boy, brushing his long hair from his eyes with his bent wrist, looked resentfully at his brother who continued to eat.

"I tol' you to cut them toes," Ham said to Martha.

"I goin' to do it, Masta, suh. I goin' to," she assured him. "They like buzzard's claws."

"Well, put on 'em these clean clothes, after they's et," Hammond instructed the woman. "Got to turn up the arms and legs of the littlern an' gallus the britches so they won't slide off. An' give somethin' to this Meg, if that peppermint ain't spoiled it. Cain't keep folks from feedin' em trash—seems like." He went into the dining room to join Maddox who was half through his dinner, which was of ham with red gravy, sweet potatoes and biscuits, milk, butter, jellies, pickles, and coffee.

Martha was more interested in feeding the slaves than in serving the

masters, but she did not neglect the table. Toward the end of the meal she told Hammond, "I fixed them toes now, suh, nice an' short so as they won't gather up no more dirt. Them was shore dirty varmints, suh; through three waters, both of 'em. Sweet smellin' now. Don't stink one bit."

"Mustees don't stink like other niggers, noways," said Maddox. "Marth here, an' she ain't washed all over ever' week or two, strong enough to drive you out."

"I washes, Masta suh, all time washes," protested the black woman.

"Slops, you means," said her master.

"Them new clothes fitten right good," said Martha, pouring a third cup of coffee for Hammond and pulling the sorghum pitcher within his reach. "The arms an' legs too long on the littler, but the belly ain't much too big, suh, an' him stickin' out after feedin'."

"Puffin' out, eh?" Hammond pondered aloud. "Worms! Worms bloats they belly when they full. Reason he scrawny. Hopin' he don't start in havin' fits 'fore I gits him home an' doses him."

"Shouldn't wonder. Sime feeds skim milk—lots of it. Cheap. Ever'body knowin' milk makes worms," said Maddox. "Had ought to keep 'em wormed out; but, yet an' all, Sime bein' ailin'—," he excused his brother.

It had been Hammond's intention to set out for Crowfoot immediately after dinner, but he thought it might be interesting to look in at the tavern for half an hour and see the first of the fights and the kind of bucks being fought. He might, in fact, meet Charles Woodford and they could go to Crowfoot together. Meg he placed in the surrey, and cautioned him to sit straight, not to move, and to wait for his return. He ordered Fred to reharness his horses.

"Goin' this time, is you, suh?" the tall hostler asked doubtfully, and got no answer.

As Hammond started to leave the stable, he met a heavy hipped brown woman, swinging slowly into the door. She stepped to one side to permit him to pass.

"This her," said Fred, "the one I was tellin' you."

"This the gen'leman?" the woman asked. "Umm! Umm!"

"Never know she in foal, 'ceptin' she milkin' up a little," said Fred, lifting the woman's breast. "Don' hang so."

Indifferent to the woman's buxom charms, Hammond turned to admonish the hostler to feed his mares before harnessing them.

"Don' know who it goin' to 'long to—Masta Jackson or Masta Major, 'ceptin' he come before the mor'gage gits him. Maybe you goin' to want her comin' back."

Hammond smiled inwardly to think of his need for a woman on his way back.

At the tavern he found an apathetic gathering of something like a score of men, of which two of the loafers at the general store were a part, two or

three young boys, besides sundry slaves for fighting and betting. A mirrorless bar filled one side of the room, the major space in which was occupied by an enclosure about fifteen feet square, boarded around to a height of four one-foot boards, loosely nailed together so that it could be erected and knocked apart at will. This was the arena in which took place the fights, which public opinion had driven indoors from the open back yard.

The company parted to make way for the crippled stranger in plum broadcloth, of whom the men were in a kind of suspicious awe, first as an outlander and secondly as a presumed gentleman. He approached the narrow bar, looked about him for an acquaintance whom he might ask to drink with him, and ordered corn whiskey, inviting the bartender, in lieu of better company, to join him. His reputation seemed to have preceded him.

"Stayin' at the Maddox, ain't you?" the bartender asked, and Ham admitted the charge. "Eph bin a-sellin' you them mustees of Sime's?" Hammond gulped his wiskey with a nod. "Hope you didn't pay much. They all been tryin' to git shet of 'em a long spell."

Hammond began to doubt his bargain. "Whut ails 'em?" he asked.

The bartender sniffed, "Mustees—that one thing. Nobody buyin' mustee bucks. Delicate. Sluts, on the other hand—if they bin sluts—. Besides, Sime never feed 'em."

Hammond's courage resurged. Tastes in color varied and the boys could be fattened. Mere skeletons they were, but sound skeletons. You could see how they hung together and it was the bones that counted, as his father had dinned into him. "Thought mayhap Charles Woodford would be here. Is he comin'?" he inquired.

"Charlie?" repeated the bartender. "Charlie is off. Followed off some trifler, come a-sparkin' his sister. Claimed cousin or some kin. Course, the ol' Major drove him off, Charlie goin' along. Like him; the more rapscallion one is, the more Charlie cotton to him."

"Oh, Charles is back—a long time," protested Ham, displeased but amused.

The bartender nodded his doubt. "The Major keepin' him penned, I reckon —runnin' off that way. Dick, neither; don' see 'em. Dick makin' a preacher an' gone temp'ance. Got to have 'em, I allow—preachers."

"Reverend Jones is right good."

The bartender bristled. "That god damn blatherskite. Lick your ass fer four bits," he stammered and spat.

Hammond did not gainsay the statement, but the bartender wished he had not made it to a stranger, lest he might have overstepped decorum. He was disgruntled anyway because little money was being spent. His doubt was that many of the men had any to spend.

He rapped a glass on the bar for attention and called out with an assumption of geniality. "Come on, gather roun', all you; the first one is on the house." He turned to Hammond and sneered under his breath, "Watch them come."

The drink loosened the tongues and the purse strings. Three men bought rounds of drinks and Hammond felt called upon to return the compliment. His money thawed the ice, and while the men addressed him with a kind of diffident deference, he was no longer the inscrutable foreigner.

At the end of the bar one man nudged his neighbor and whispered, "Rich! Whoever he be, got money. See all that gol' when he open his poke?"

Another man of middle years, who had bought the second round of drinks, offered Hammond an apology for the Negroes he was about to see fight, who were, indeed, a motley assortment of field hands impressed for the sport. Black and brown, tall and short, fat and lean, sound and broken, Hammond saw none that he doubted any one of thirty Falconhurst bucks might vanquish, not to mention the Mandingo. The man's explanation was that the highest exponents of the pugilistic exercise were unable to bring their bucks for one reason or another. One had a mare about to foal; another's wife was ill; a third was ill himself; a fourth had been summoned to court and had gone to Montgomery; a fifth would perhaps appear, but without his Negro, who had been bitten on the foot by a rattlesnake and whose recovery was doubtful. His death would be a blow for the sport and a considerable loss to the owner.

"I tol' Mac he had ought to sell," boasted a florid man with a week's beard. "I was right there, right there, when the dealer offered, an' I tol' him. Now look at him, bit and like as not die."

"Bad luck not to take it, when it is offered, I always a-sayin'," agreed a neighbor.

"Too bad," the bartender shook his head. "I figurin' on matchin' Mac's buck agin that big 'un o' Hodkins. That ought to make a fracas. Hodkins' buck ain't never bin headed, an' neither ain't Mac's."

Hammond pricked up his ears. "Mine took hisn at Benson—Hodkins' that is," he spat out with no discretion and was sorry for it.

"Must a ben lately," said the bartender. "I ain't disputin' you, suh. Benson? That whure you knowin' Charlie Woodford? Benson? That whure livin' that feller he foller off."

"Ol' Hodkins a-comin'?" demanded an exuberant young sportsman. "There a sure 'nough gen'leman. Don't do nothin' but go around fightin'. Always got somethin' prime."

"He kin. He rich," interposed a voice. Riches implied anything from six months sustenance upward, depending upon the estimator.

"Yas, Hodkins comin' through," confirmed the bartender. "Always does, 'bout this time. Comes through to collec' his in'erest—try to."

"In'erest on whut?"

"On ol' Major. Hodkins totes the blister on Crowfoot an' all them fine fixin's out there an' the niggers, whut left o' 'em," the bartender gossiped.

"Major cain't never pay. Got nothin' to pay with. If he had got, he'd buy a gyascutus or somethin'," laughed the man who had apologized for

the fighters. "Major jest ups the interest, and Hodkins takes it. Got him payin' twenty percent now. Promisin' to pay."

"Thought it was the bank. Major said—"

"Major full of—"

"Bank not totin' no debt like that. Bank would a took it long ago."

"Hodkins darsen't take it. Never git it out. Better have it owin'."

The information Hammond had gathered relieved whatever anxiety he had had about the Woodford finances. With Hodkins dead and nobody except the coterie at Pearl's aware of his death, Crowfoot was in no immediate danger of foreclosure. Hammond could have bitten out his tongue after having said that he knew Hodkins, but the politeness of the bartender's reply, his refusal to dispute Hammond's assertion, was an assurance that it was not believed.

Hodkins perhaps had heirs, who might eventually learn of his death and press Woodford for payment of his debt, but there was an equal likelihood that no heirs existed, that none would be found, that the mortgage documents were hidden or lost, or that the notes would never be presented for payment. As likely as not, Hammond reasoned, the death of Hodkins would leave Woodford in fee simple possession of his property. The mortgages would serve as a flaw in the Major's title, however, which was just as well since they would prevent the old man from the sale or further hypothecation of his home.

The fights when they came, were dull. The participants were awkward, untrained, and undisciplined, field hands whose owners with a sporting inclination brought them into town to match against their approximate equals. It was not that fighters or owners failed of gameness, but the boys were not beautiful and not skilled. The second fight lasted thirty-seven minutes, and, when both contestants were so exhausted that they could fight no more, was declared a draw. Talk of using hot irons to force the participants to continue was hushed because there was no fire ready and because the owners were agreed to adjourn the contest and renew it on another day.

In the third of the fights, one of the boys was severely gouged but it was believed that he would not be blinded. The winner was injured by a loose splinter from the uneven floor which punctured his rump to three or four inches, but he was unaware of it until the fight was finished.

Wagner, the impresario of the fights and owner of the tavern, was phlegmatic, sodden in fact, and with no such flair as Pearl's for showmanship. He had so much difficulty straddling the barrier to the arena in the first fight, that thereafter he contented himself to make his announcements from behind the bar. The outcome of two of the three fights were by no means decisive; Pearl would never have declared the second fight a draw.

There were more owners of more Negroes, but satisfactory matches were impossible to make; and, after the third fight, Wagner announced that since there were no more slave fights arranged, it was necessary to fall back upon

the fighting of dogs. A pale, ferret-faced man with a pointed nose with a thaw-drop of moisture on its end appeared from some back room, towed by a rope attached to a crop-eared nondescript brown dog of some seventy pounds. From the same general direction, a potbellied, big man with broken veins in his heavy cheeks brought another dog of similar variety or mixture of varieties as the first, except that the second dog was black-and-white pied and somewhat larger than the first one.

They were called by courtesy Bulldogs, but in appearance belied that taxonomy. In make and shape they were as much like Bull Terriers as anything, with bulging cheeks rounding to narrow, short muzzles. But in them also was a hint of the hound, possibly the Bloodhound, which was accentuated by the small, lemon-drop eyes, under which the lid sagged to show a bloodshot haw. They were presumed to be full brothers, but from different litters.

The crowd parted to give the dogs clearance. The ferret-faced man lashed the brown dog with the end of the rope to restrain it from tugging on the leash, but to no avail. The two were taken to opposite sides of the arena so that they should not see each other until they were pitted.

One of the spectators stepped forward to lay his hands on the pied dog's head, which brought a warning from the big man who had him in charge, but the dog only looked up and wagged his tail. This emboldened another to step out of the crowd, stoop by the dog and stroke his back with his hand, which the dog appeared to enjoy.

"I had one jest like this 'un oncet, 'bout ten years I reckon, only mine was a gyp. Biggern this, it was; an' smart, that gyp knew ever'thin'—more than any nigger on the place. An' fight—." Nobody listened.

The Negroes along the wall backed further against it, big eyed with their fear of the savage beasts. Some leaned forward to obtain a better view between the legs of the white men.

"How you like it to have that'n a'ter you?" a white man with too much whiskey said to the brown boy who had won the first fight.

"Naw, suh; naw, suh!" replied the Negro. "Uhn, Uhn!"

"He tear your guts out, guts right out, an' eat 'em down, eat 'em down, heart an' all."

"Sho' would, sho' would, suh; guts right out, suh," the Negro shivered as he whispered the reply.

"Whut goin' to happen! Ifn you runs, or talks back or nothin', you masta sure goin' to git that 'un after you," threatened the drunk. "That there dog is a nigger dog fer sartain. Jest loves nigger meat."

"Naw, suh; please, suh. Don't let that dog. Naw, suh," begged the slave. "I ain't no runner, ain't never sassy, ain't nothin'. Please, suh."

"Hah, hah, haw!" roared the drunk. "Sho' does admire to see a good dog tear a nigger."

"Stop a-skearin' that boy. He ain't done nothin'," Hammond turned to

the white man. "Dog not goin' to bite, an' you behaves," he reassured the slave.

"Good fer 'em. Good fer 'em. Haw, haw, haw," laughed the man. "Keeps 'em quiet an' God-fearin'."

"Ain't yourn—the nigger?" asked Ham as an afterthought, fearing that he might have meddled.

"No, ain't mine, but I got one about like it; an' I would, I would take the dog to him ifn ever he run. I've seen 'em tear 'em, tear 'em all to pieces."

The owners were lifting the dogs over the railing into the ring, and the crowd pressed forward around it. The Negroes felt easier and relaxed their pressure against the wall.

Released, the dogs strutted, stiff-legged and stiff of tail toward the center of the pit. They sniffed noses with a barely perceptible wagging of tails. They reversed their positions and smelled of and licked lightly each other's hinder parts; and then each investigated the sex of the other. They returned to the smelling of noses, and the brown one sniffed the pied one's ear.

The spotted dog remained taut in its muscles. Its flanks trembled. The brown dog backed away, wagging its tail vigorously. It sank down on its forehand to spring at its rival. The spectators were as tense as the spotted dog. The brown dog sprang and the other parried.

Now both were down as if to spring. A yard's length divided them. Simultaneously they went for each other and both reared on his hinder legs at the impact. They boxed lightly for two or three blows. They separated and the brown dog poised again to spring. As he came forward, the pied dog leaped to one side. The brown dog backed away, wagging its tail vigorously. With a look behind to make sure of its rival, it took off in a fast lope around the ring, the spotted dog in pursuit. Not a snarl. No blood had been shed. The spotted dog turned around and started running in the opposite direction, and the brown dog reversed and started after him. The ring was not large enough to permit of such running tactics, and the two dogs returned to the center of the square, pawing at each other. The tenseness of the spectators relaxed. The two dogs scampered and romped and played, utterly amiable. The crowd was at last aware that there was to be no fight, and a part of it retired to the bar, dispirited. The remainder still stood at the ringside watching the dogs at play, but dogs and people soon tired. The dogs adjourned their romp to rest and pant. They resumed it for a few minutes after which they went to the sides of the ring, where their masters were standing, and lay down.

The ferret-faced man lifted his dog over the rail and kicked it three times before it could escape from him. The paunchy man laughed silently as he took the pied dog from the pit and turned it loose to wander among the feet of the crowd.

It strolled a few steps, trotted around the ring, lifted its leg against a far corner of the ring. The frightened intake of breath was audible as it ambled,

shaking its whole rear rather than its tail, toward the Negroes against the wall. They shrank back as far as they could. One of the small boys covered his eyes with his arm; one cried hysterically; a younger one clasped a larger one about the leg and buried his head in the trouser leg of his elder to await his doom.

The brown victor in the first fight, when the innocuous dog approached him, implored it with words not to tear him. "I ain't done nothin'; I ain't goin' t' run. Don' tear me, dog, don' tear me. You good dog, don' tear me."

The good-natured animal sniffed his knees, wagging its tail, begging for recognition. The Negro, as avid for attention as the dog, when he at length saw that the dog intended him no harm, reached down and laid his hand on its head, and all his fears subsided.

The owners of the man and of the dog were in separate groups at the bar, the one still celebrating his victory, the other drowning the embarrassment of his dog's failure to give battle.

"Dogs ain't like niggers. They don't crave no fight, ain't no way to make 'em. Don't do no good to burn 'em," a fellow drinker sought to console him.

"Don't have to burn a nigger," said another, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "Jest show it to him. Jest show him that hot iron, an' spit on it."

"That right," one of the loafers edged into the party in search of somebody to buy him a drink. "That right. That iron hissin', that nigger goin' a fight."

Hammond had not seen a slave he would care to own. The fights were not interesting enough to tempt him to wager on them. Only the white, raw whiskey held him, and he drank more of it than he intended, more than he wanted. For the improvement in the race of fighting dogs he was concerned not at all, although he was just drunk enough to be amused at the fiasco.

He returned to the bar for a final drink for which the earlier ones had stimulated his desire. The afternoon was too far spent for him to go to Crowfoot. He doubted that he could reach there before supper and did not want to arrive the worse for corn. Morning would be soon enough in any event. He dreaded the meeting with all the guests the Woodfords would have assembled. Moreover, he was sleepy.

He wandered back to the stable, ordered Fred to unhitch, feed, and bed his team, unconcerned with the lanky slave's patent but unspoken disgruntlement. Meg had sat, but not always upright, in the surrey. Such fidgety impatience as he had felt, he would not have dared to exhibit, even if it had not all vanished when he saw his master coming. His special circumspection was wasted, since Hammond in his cups was less truculent than usual. He took the boy to the hotel and ordered supper for him along with the mustees. He himself wanted no supper; he only wanted to sleep.

"Fights much?" the landlord asked him.

Hammond sneered.

"I'd a go'd, but with Sime a-dyin'—"

"Didn't miss nothin'," Hammond said, "'ceptin' a headache in the mornin'."

"Better eat," insisted the host.

Hammond shook his head. "I wants to go in, as soon as them boys has et."

"Ain't nobody in the other room. Sat'day never no business. Better let me chain 'em in there. Be a-rattlin' your bed all night."

"Don't spancel 'em. Leave 'em go loose in my room. They bellies full; they go to sleep."

"I reckon," Maddox agreed. "They knows which side of their bread. Ain't goin' to run from grub a plenty back to Sime's woman."

Without removing their clothes, the mustees were bedded down on the bare floor at the end of Hammond's bed with a length of worn, loose rag-carpet to serve them as a blanket. Meg was stripped down to prevent wrinkling of his suit and wrapped in a quilt. Hammond was sleepy with whiskey and, since he had prayed with Jones that day, neglected his usual nightly ceremony. The touch of queasiness he felt as he flopped into bed failed to keep him awake.

Meg heard his master mumble between snores. It frightened him but he dared not wake the white man, and, soon becoming inured to the clamor, fell asleep.

CHAPTER 23

HAMMOND awoke about half past two with a sense that something was amiss; he didn't know what. He found it difficult to orient himself. He raised on his elbow before he could remember where he was. He saw Meg on his belly sleeping placidly and heard his steady and regular exhalations of his breath. But the door of the room was open; he believed that he had closed it, but was not sure. Maybe that was what was wrong.

He slid out of bed to close the door and, seeing the wrinkled strip of carpet, bethought him for the first time of his new slaves. They were gone. They had run. He was dazed at his discovery. Then he was angry, as angry at his own carelessness as at the slaves. But for his making himself sodden, this could never have happened.

He pulled on his trousers hastily without drawers. Barefooted, he padded out into the lobby, stubbing his toe on the threshold. He was not sure which of two doors was the entrance to Maddox's room, but there was no other guest, and so he banged on both. "They run," he bellowed; "they run, them mustees, damn 'em, run."

"Wait a minute," he heard Maddox call. "Wait a minute." Maddox in his shirt and drawers flung open the door and asked, "Whut that you sayin'?"

"Them boys gone—got up an' gone."

The man rubbed his eyes and yawned. "I knowed it," he said. "I knowed it, told you to chain 'em up." Then disgruntled at being waked, he laughed aloud gloatingly.

"You said they knowed which side the butter was. Said they didn't need no chainin'."

"I was jest givin' in. They yourn; I got your note-of-hand. Was fer you to say."

"I not tryin' to crawdaddle out of it. I wants 'em. Which way they went, you reckon? Anybody got any good dogs?"

"Dogs won't be no good. Them boys were washed jest yestidy. 'Sides, they white, almost, an' don't give off no scent." Maddox continued to laugh at his guest's bafflement.

"That carpet they sleepin' on ought to give dogs a clue."

"Prob'ly didn't lay ten minutes," objected Maddox. "A mustee smart. Cain't trust one no more than a white man."

"Whut you reckon I got to do?" demanded Hammond in his despair. "Put on your clothes."

"Like, they gone back home to Sime's. Give 'em time to git there," yawned Maddox with complacence. "I goin' out there, come mornin'. I'll fetch 'em. Go back to bed. Cain't do nothin' until day."

"But I cain't wait. I got to git married tomorrow."

"You go ahead. Git yourself married. I'll have 'em here awaitin' when you

come back through. That is, an' they're at Sime's."

"It that preacher. He scared 'em—scared 'em with his prayin'. Whippin' with scorpions, goin' hongry, takin' 'em afur off to Benson! Don't wonder they runs. Jones a-tellin' God how!" Hammond scoffed.

But he accepted Maddox's counsel, and returned to bed. Meg didn't wake. Hammond did not, however, go to sleep again. He lay and censured himself for his carelessness, for drinking so much, for trusting slaves of which he knew nothing, and for his failure to manacle them. He heard his father's cackling derision when he should be told the incident, and it would be more merciless than anger. He did not fear his father's blame, but his laughter would scathe. Hammond wondered whether it might be possible to dig up the kettle and pay the note without the old man's knowledge. He need never know. It was a violation of confidence, but the son was tempted.

At the first streaks of light in the east, he arose, shook Meg awake, and put on his clothes. He made as little noise as possible, tiptoed into the kitchen to get a drink of water, and saw fat Martha sprawled before the fireplace asleep on the floor. He could rouse Fred to harness his team, but decided to wait for breakfast. He had eaten no supper and, furthermore, he didn't want Meg to go without his breakfast. The Maxwells prided themselves upon feeding their people.

He stepped out-of-doors into the quiet cool morning, paced the road impatiently back and forth for a furlong, finally wandered into the barn to have a look at his mares, both of which ignored him. He saw smoke from the kitchen chimney, and knew that Martha was up and preparing breakfast at last. Fred descended from the hayloft of the barn and Maddox appeared at the open door of the hotel.

"Whut time you goin'?" Hammond greeted him.

"Out to Sime's? Oh, when I gits straightened around fer it. Ain't no hurry. Ifn Sime die, he won't know afterwards whuther I there, an' ifn them boys go home, they goin' to wait till I come."

Hammond saw nothing to be straightened around except Maddox's left gallus, but was aware that the man could not be hurried. He called out to Fred that he wanted his team and only half heard the mumbled reply about "always hitchin' an' unhitchin' but never a-goin'." He knew that despite the slave's protest, the order would be executed. Maddox summoned him to breakfast and he knew that Meg was already in the kitchen.

When he came out of the dining room, he cautioned Maddox, "You gits 'em, you better chain 'em. Don't take no chance, like I done."

"Them boys?" Maddox prefixed his reply. "I keep 'em, an' if I gits 'em—an' if I gits 'em. But I ain't goin' to whup 'em fer you. I won't be charged with scarrin' 'em up. I'll jest have 'em here fer you."

"I'll wait till I gits 'em home fer they floggin'."

"Ain't done right away, they fergits what it fer. Catch 'em in the act. That the time to lay it on. But you got to do it you own self, I ain't."

"I'll reminder 'em whut they done. Not like plain niggers; they mustees. How much I owe?"

Maddox suggested that settlement of the hotel score be postponed until the guest's return journey, but Hammond insisted upon discharging it immediately.

CHAPTER 24

WHEN Hammond gathered the reins he sympathized with the mares' impulse to turn homeward rather than onward toward Crowfoot. He shared the impulse, but resolution ruled and he pulled the right-hand rein.

He disliked leaving behind him the unfinished business of retrieving the runaway slaves. He wished that he had never seen them, that he had never drawn rein in Briarfield at all. He dreaded what was ahead of him—his wedding, the prospect of which would have irked him less if the festivities connected with it could have been avoided. Crowfoot would overflow with guests strange to him, with whom he would be at ill ease. It was like Major Woodford to make the most of his daughter's marriage. The standing up to take those vows before all those people, the dinner afterward, and the banter he would have to endure, the effort to behave like a gentleman when he wasn't quite sure of being one, all frightened Hammond. Taking refuge in vicarious good manners, he warned his servant about how to act; keep his coat straight and his pants buttoned, eat what was offered him and don't ask for anything else, don't pick his nose, don't break wind, and don't tell embarrassing lies.

Hammond's thoughts were behind him at Simon Maddox's farm and at Briarfield, even back at Falconhurst, and they were ahead of him at Crowfoot, as he drove through the vibrant, warm morning. There was no enjoyment of the lush green landscape, of the planted acres, of the brood of young bobwhites that scurried at his approach, of the meadow lark's calls, of the hawk, a speck in the turquoise dome, of the blacksnake that slithered across the road, causing his horses to shy. When he reached that point where, on the way with Blanche to church, they had encountered Charles returning home from town, he remembered the boy's truculence and how Blanche had countered it with a threat to reveal something she knew of him to his parents. Whatever the offense had been, the threat had worked like a charm. Immature, impulsive, and wayward as he knew Charles to be, Hammond had learned not to dislike him and looked forward to seeing him again, despite Charles' childish animosity for his sister, which was perhaps only jealousy.

It was not much short of noon when the carriage reached Crowfoot. "Set up straight now, we's gittin' there. I wants you to ac' good and right," the white man admonished his servant as he turned into the lane that led to the house.

"I is, Masta, suh," the small boy replied with resolution.

Hammond was relieved, and a little amazed, to see so little stir about the place. Possibly, he thought, the Major had restrained himself from making a festival of his daughter's wedding. A ragged young slave scurried to take charge of the team, and before Hammond could reach the front door the old house-boy appeared from a side door to receive him.

"Whure at your masta? Whure Major Woodford?" Hammond demanded.

"He gone to church, Masta, suh. White folks all gone to meetin'," the slave replied. "I knows you though, suh. You that white gen'leman that come time back. I knows you. Come in, suh, if you please, suh." He threw open the front door.

"I'll wait here," said Hammond, sitting down on the edge of the gallery floor. "I reckon they not goin' to be long, now, specially the weddin'—"

"They all goin' to Sterlin' Plantation to eat dinner—all 'ceptin' Masta Dick. He be comin' home, suh, this afternoon, he goin' to dip some niggers in the crick that ain't babtize yet. He comin'," the yellow Negro said, dragging out a large chair from inside the house.

"But the weddin'—," Hammond urged.

"Ain't knowin' nothin' about that, Masta," the Negro kept his counsel. "Masta never said nothin' 'bout that, suh."

Had he mistaken the appointed date, Hammond wondered. He got up and sat in the chair for a short while, Meg continuing to sit on the floor, but later Hammond arose and paced the driveway impatiently, glancing toward the entrance at every tenth step. He was aware of the Negro eyes from the quarters, but ignored them.

"Kin I git you sompin', sompin' to eat, or sompin', Masta, suh, whiles you waitin'," the house servant returned to ask.

Hammond wanted nothing except to be enlightened. "I'll jes' wait," he said.

"How Masta Charles come on, suh? You're the one, suh, he go away with, ain't you, suh?" the Negro asked, without doubt.

"He back, Charles back, weeks ago," the white man affirmed. "Ain't he?" he then asked as an afterthought.

"Naw, suh, Masta, suh; naw, suh. Masta Charles ain't never come back."

So. That was the reason for the lack of preparation for the wedding! No money, no bride! What had become of Charles? What had happened to him? And to Jason? There was the rub! Charles had absconded with the Maxwell money, the Maxwell ring, and the Maxwell slave. He was not only a thief, but worse, a nigger-stealer, than which there was nothing more base.

Hammond, so far from being disturbed, was just a little pleased at his relief from his obligation. It would be embarrassing, however, to explain that the marriage had not taken place. He was a candid young man and, at the time, blushed to think of explaining why. He had no ardent desire for marriage, but he would rather go to the altar than to be dismissed, jilted. He should have to marry to beget an heir, but no longer did he doubt of finding a suitable woman. To ask one was now easy, and to be sent about his business was the worst that could result. He was confident that it would be easy to find himself a wife, and without the payment of twenty-five hundred dollars too.

What a gull he had been to entrust Woodford's son with so much money! And what a fool he was to wait. By leaving now he should be jilting rather

than jilted, or could rationalize that he was. He had resolved to order his horses again when a horseman came down the lane.

Dick dismounted and threw his bridle to the same Negro boy who had taken Hammond's team. Dressed all in black, he was a fine figure of a young man; save for the wild, ecstatic, irresponsible, drunken look in his faded blue eyes, he might have been handsome. But he wasn't drunk, not on alcohol. Hammond walked toward him.

"You! You that Maxwell!" Dick accosted Ham. "You the one that plight to marry my sister! Whut you do here? An' I weren't a preacher an' you a crip, I'd gouge your eyes out, both en 'em; I'd cut out yo' damn gizzard an' feed it back to you on the end of a knife! Whut you do at Crowfoot?"

"Whut I do at Crowfoot?" Hammond restrained himself. "I come to marry Miz Blanche, like I said. This the day she set."

"After you conjure her brother away with you? An' never send no money like you was a-goin'? You think she marry no sich son-a-bitch like you?"

"I sent that fuggin' money. Sent it by that damn nigger-stealin' brother of yourn!" Hammond's temper was rising.

"Don't cuss! Don' cuss! I'm a preacher, you know. Don't cuss," Dick retreated into his vocation.

"Then, don't cuss your own sel'," Hammond admonished. "Nigger tellin' me Charles never come, never fetched Major Woodford that money?"

"An' you trust him with money? Trus' Charlie?" Dick was incredulous. "Cain't trus' that scoun'rel with four bits. I don't credit you send him."

"Five or six weeks back, he bin gone. Took one of my niggers along, my papa's, an' twenty-five hunderd dollars, gold."

"Gold! A nigger!" Dick sat down on the edge of the gallery and guffawed. "You cain't trust Charlie with a nigger more than with a dollar. Charlie out an' gone—maybe in the Texies by this time. Whurever Charlie be, the money sure spent an' that nigger sure sol'."

His laughter took the hysterical intensity from Dick's eyes. It was contagious and Hammond laughed with his cousin, but with no such spasms of hilarity. He was the butt of the costly joke and to join in the amusement was the best way to soften the shock of it.

"But whut fer you take him along, first place?" asked Dick, drying his eyes with his hand. "It whut you gits, enticin' him along."

"Enticin'? Charles caught me up an' say his papa given his leave; he swear it," and Hammond retold the story of his being overtaken and joined by young Woodford.

"An' you believe him? You believe Charlie, whut he say, whut he swear? Better turn it inside out, an' take it the other way, Charlie never say true in his life."

"At Falconhurst, he right good, right trusty."

"Gittin' ready. Gittin' ready fer devilment. But I believes you. Reckon you say true. 'Bout you an' Blanche, got to wait till Papa come." Dick rose

to his feet. "Got to eat. Dinner ready. Likely ain't much an' folks away. But come along."

Meg was sent to the kitchen for his meal.

"Right likely little buck you got," Dick commented upon the obediently retreating child. "Breed him?"

"Him an' his twin, jest alike."

"Papa don' have no luck breedin', seems like wenches slips 'em or they dies or sumpin'. Ain' more than about a dozen young around."

"My papa don't have no trouble that a-way." Hammond took no credit for himself. "Coursen, we mostly buys, when we kin find 'em."

As the two went through the sitting room and into the dining room, Dick evaluated his guest aloud. "You all right an' right hones', seem like. Don't care an' you are cripped. You got money an' all them niggers. I goin' to like you, don't make no matter whut folks a-sayin'."

"My mamma was a Hammond," the guest added in his own behalf.

"So also is Charlie's mamma—and mine," Dick countered.

After dinner, Dick excused himself. "Papa havin' me practice preachin' on the people," he explained. "Ain't never babtised heretofore, but got to today—two or three wenches an' a buck ain't been saved. Papa puttin' it off. Don't crave wettin' his britches. Reckon you'd rather snooze or somethin'. I'll hurry. Won't be long." The fanatic gleam, the trade-mark of his evangelism, reappeared in Dick's eyes as he stalked away.

To snooze was the last thing Hammond wanted to do. He paced the floor of the house, paced the gallery, paced the driveway. How long the uncertainty would last he didn't know. He was used to making plans and hewing to them. He wished that he had gone with Dick to the religious meeting for the Negroes and was moved to follow him, but thought better of the project. He had better wait. To be refused his bride he could endure, but he wanted to have the matter settled, to get it over and done with.

He thought of how much Blanche had cost him, twenty-five hundred dollars plus the ring and two journeys to Crowfoot. Of course the first trip had included his visit to The Coign and his purchases of Mede and Ellen, for neither of which he had any regrets. If only he had gone there first, before he had come to Crowfoot. But dear as Ellen was to him, she wasn't his wife. That was unthinkable. He had no compunctions about her, no conscience; he had done no wrong. After all, he needed a wife to give him an heir; if not Blanche, then another.

He even charged to Blanche the Maddox mustees that he had bought and lost. That is, they would be chargeable if they were not recovered. She was to blame, he rationalized, since if he had not come to Crowfoot he would never have seen and bought them. Thinking of them, painful as it was, took his mind from the more momentous fiasco of his marriage. He wondered whether Eph Maddox had found the boys safe at Sime's farm and whether they would be waiting for him at the hotel in Briarfield. Unless they had

returned to Sime's, he realized he would perhaps never find them; they were white, or would pass for whites, and were decently clothed. They could well make their ways to the North and freedom, if they knew of such a thing as freedom. He resolved to blurt the whole story to his father and to swallow his derision. Possibly the old man's compassion at the failure of his marriage would allay his sarcasm about the slaves. But might he not deride the marriage also? Laughter was the father's balm for misfortune, but Hammond knew it would hold no bitterness. A show of amusement was his way of sympathy.

Meg, replete with victuals, returned and, sensing his master's distress, fell in behind him, following back and forth like a puppy at his heels. The slave knew nothing of the nature of the master's troubles and was concerned only that he should have them. He did know that he could not allay them and only sought to share them. At length, Hammond, weary of being dogged, sent the boy to the gallery, where he sat in a solemn contemplation of the other's steps that was almost as irritating as being followed.

"I ducked 'em, ducked 'em good," called Dick in triumph, returning from his baptizing. "It was easy. I kin do it. On'y that lean wench slip away from me an' like to a-drowned, on'y she never."

"You all soaked. Look at your britches. Better put on dry," suggested Hammond, interrupted in his soliloquy.

"I took 'em off an' wrang 'em out," said Dick. "They goin' to dry. Whut I needs is a drink of corn. Medicine! I temp'ance of course. But carryin' things too fur to not use it fer medicine—keep from ketchin' somethin'. You not temp'ance, I reckon? Wantin' a drink?" He led the way to the spring-house where the Major maintained his whiskey.

Hammond was indeed wanting a drink and followed his host with a feeling that approached gratitude. One drink begot thirst for another, and the second for the third. The afternoon was growing late, but Hammond was indifferent to the delay of the Woodfords' arrival. He had found lethe.

The sound of horses' heels in the driveway broke the spell of their drinking. Hammond heard the orotund voice of the Major demanding, "Whose boy are you?" and heard Meg answer politely, "I's Masta Ham Maxwell's nigger, Masta, please, suh."

"You git out an' go up to your room, an' don' come down until I says," he heard the Major subdue his voice, which was still loud enough, and heard him boom a whisper into his wife's ear trumpet, "Hammond Maxwell." When Beatrix failed to understand him, he repeated twice, slowly and syllabically as if to enable her to read his lips, "Ham-mond! Hammond Max-well!"

The woman replied with a startled intake of breath, "Oh!"

Dick and Hammond emerged from the spring-house in time to see Beatrix, all in brown, sedately, without a glance to right or left, enter the front door of the house. Blanche, in the selfsame challis dress in which Hammond had first seen her, followed her mother, but with a high-headed assumption of

dignity and a tragic tread that declared her need of resolution not to look askance.

The Major maintained his ground in the driveway and waited for the young man to approach. The carriage drove away toward the stables.

"Papa, this Mista Maxwell," Dick presented the guest as if he were unknown to his father.

"Reckon I don' know the skunk?" the Major demanded, drawing himself to his utmost height. "Had ought ter. Throwin' my poor girl into a decline! Whut he wantin' here now?"

"He sent it! He sent the money!" Dick hastened to appease his father.

"Then whyn't it come?" the Major did not credit his son's assurance.

"Sent it by Charlie! Haw, haw, haw! Sent it by Charlie!" Dick's feet stamped in rhythm with his laughter at the inconceivable stupidity of entrusting anything to his brother.

"That why he spirit Charles away, I reckon—so he kin tell he sent the money an' it didn't come. Right clever sharper. Ain't got the money an' never had it. Never meant to send."

Hammond had not spoken. Now he said simply and without show of rancor, "An' you doesn't believe me, doesn't believe I sent the money, doesn't believe I sent Miz Blanche no ring, doesn't believe your Charles stole no buck when he left, doesn't take my word as a gen'leman, all I kin do now is to ast you kindly, suh, fer my hosses. I come to wed Miz Blanche, like she say; this the eighth of May. You could save me the journey—the least you could do, suh, seem like. Will you be so good, suh, as to order my hosses?" He was proud of himself for the speech he had made.

"I never said it; never said I didn't believe your word. Wait a minute," the Major sheathed his horns. "Maybe we goin' to un'erstan' one another. Maybe we goin' to fix things up. I tells you: an' you sends that money, that is an' you promise to again, maybe you kin wed my daughter. Maybe you did send; I ain't sayin' you never. But you got to show faith, an' sen' agin."

"I craves my hosses, suh, if you please, suh. I ain't a-purchasin' your daughter—the second time. Ifn your son stolen your money an' my nigger, we pockets our losin's; but not another dollar does I beg from my papa fer you, not another two bits. Miz Blanche, she ain't to blame, an' I ain't to blame. I'll marry her, but I ain't a-goin' to buy her."

Major Woodford hesitated. Suitors for his daughter's hand were rare enough, and none other was affluent. This man in his family should stiffen his credit and later could hardly fail to help him out of his financial jam. Could he afford to wreck Blanche's prospects and possibly his own on the rock of pride? He decided that he could not. Moreover, he thought of Charles. Maxwell could not be expected to prosecute his brother-in-law for the theft of a Negro—the most heinous of crimes. If Charles should be caught, the theft would be ignored or passed off as a mere mistake. The Major would not desert his son.

All of these things ran quickly through his mind, not as successive thoughts but all at once. "I willin' to make the sacrifice an' if Blanche's mamma is. She a Hammond, you know. She proud. But, other hand, I don't crave no case of green sickness, that it look like my daughter a-comin' to."

"Come in, come in," urged Dick. "It all right. Don't fret. Mamma do like Papa say. Always does." He ushered Hammond into the Empire drawing room. Holding the door, he asked, "Wants I should turn your nigger inside or sen' him to quarters?"

"He house tamed," answered Hammond, sitting gingerly upon the damask divan.

Meg came in and at his master's behest sat on the floor. He chose a place directly at the feet of Hammond, who leaned down and straightened the slack in the boy's stocking. "That garter too big," he remarked, adjusting the stocking under it. "Got to watch it."

The suitor heard the girl's father discussing the marriage with her deaf mother in the adjoining sitting room. Dick was with them but had little to say; he favored the suit but thought it wise not to urge it too heartily. The Major sought to subdue his voice, but his whispers when loud enough to penetrate Beatrix's ear trumpet were audible to Hammond in the drawing room. Hammond made an effort not to hear, but if he failed to catch a sentence the first time it was spoken, he was unable to avoid it when it was repeated, as most speeches had to be. The Major's mind was made up, and his consultation with his wife a mere formula to enable him to excuse himself for his failure to impose, and to extract, harder terms, an effort in his capitulation to save honor.

He assured Beatrix that Hammond had denied abducting Charles, that Charles had claimed parental leave to go with him. He told of Charles' departure from Falconhurst with the Maxwell money and the ring for Blanche.

"That a fib," said Beatrix with indignation. "He ain't tellin' true. Charles would a brung it. My boy would a brung it right straight. He never sent it. I never raised Charles to be no thief."

"But he is one," countered the Major, "a nigger thief. He took away one of Warren's bucks." He had to repeat the statement three times before he could make the woman hear it; her difficulty was more a reluctance to credit the story than an inability to understand the words.

When the accusation penetrated to her consciousness, Beatrix gasped. Then she shrieked, after which she lay back in her chair. "He dead! Charles is dead," she uttered in her empty voice. "That's it. That nigger killed him an' stole that money. My boy! My pore boy! He's dead!"

"He ain't dead! You knows he ain't dead!" the Major laid his hand on his wife's arm for emphasis and consolation. "No sich thing. Charles is off, a-spendin' that money of mine. You'll see when he come ridin' up one of these days." He assumed as cheerful a tone as he was able and reinforced it with a grimace resembling a smile, although his assurance somehow lacked con-

fidence. He was, in fact, except for his wife's sake, indifferent to the fate of his son if not to the fate of the twenty-five hundred dollars.

"He dead. I say he dead. I knows it; I feels it," protested Beatrix, rolling her head back and forth on the back of her chair. "My boy dead." She broke into weeping.

Dick brushed his father aside to reach the trumpet. "An' he wasn't saved!" he screamed into her ear. "Charles never got right with Jesus! I knew it would happen. An' he dead, he burnin' in hell fire right now, burnin'! That ol' devil got ol' Charles on the ol' gridiron right now, an' punchin' him with that ol' pitchfork an' flames leapin' up all aroun' him. He wasn't never saved."

Major Woodford struggled with his son to pull him out of the range of the woman's ear-piece. "Don't tell her that," he whispered. "Don't make her no worse."

"It so, an' you know it so," shouted the preacher. "Charlie wasn't saved, an' he a-burnin'. Mamma know he a-burnin'." Dick seemed to gloat over his contemplation.

"No! No! No!" cried his mother. "I pray for him; I been a-prayin' ever' day an' ever' night. Mayhap he saved. Mayhap, jest as that nigger come down on his head, he seen Jesus an' embraced Him. Jesus is right kind; He goin' to save my boy an' He kin." She toppled forward upon her knees and bowed her head in silent prayer.

The Major picked up her trumpet which had fallen to the floor and held it to Beatrix's ear. "Whut about that weddin'? Whut you craves to do about that?" he vociferated.

"Do whut you wants! Do whut you goin' to do anyways!" the bereft mother looked up in irritation at the interruption of her prayer. "You drive away Charles; now you a-drivin' Blanche. Sellin' her jest like she was a nigger. Go on an' sell her, an' that whut you bent on."

"I ain't neither a-sellin' her. He done send the money an' Charlie stolen it. He won't sen' no more." Woodford held the horn to his wife's ear and spoke loudly but not directly into the horn. He did not know and cared little whether Beatrix heard him.

She refused to be diverted from her efforts to rescue her murdered son from the fires of hell and shifted the responsibility to the father for the disposal of her daughter. He laid the horn upon the chair and looked at Dick.

Dick nodded. "Go ahead," he said in a voice low enough not to interrupt the prayer further. "Might as well. He rich. An' besides, there ain't nobody else 'at a-wantin' her. First thing, she goin' be an' ol' maid, an' then whut?"

Major Woodford pulled himself together, hitched his neck, adjusted his coat, and assumed his most pompous mien. He strode into the adjoining room where Hammond waited. "Blanche's mamma an' me, we talked it over," he announced. "We talked it all over an' we decided. We decided on lettin' love have its way. We cain't stan' up agin it. An' you wants my daughter an'

Blanche a-wantin' you, that the way it goin' to be."

Hammond got to his feet. He had heard every word of the conversation. "I knowed you an' Cousin Beatrix weren't a-goin' to let me come all this way fer nothin'," he said, grasping the Major's extended hand.

"Better ride fer the preacher," the Major turned to Dick. "Ride fer Jones, an' bring him along quick as you kin"

"Afore supper?" Dick objected.

"Hell with supper. We got to git a preacher an' they goin' to sleep tonight. Tell Auntie Celia to keep somethin' hot, time you git back. But ride fer Jones. Whut's a-henderin' you? Lay on that quirt, an' hurry, you."

"Ain't no press," Ham suggested. "We kin wait fer mornin'."

"Put off a weddin' after it set?" The Major was horrified. "Bad luck; wouldn't have no case in it. Got to be today or not never. Set down awhile an' hold your peace, an' let me go up an' fetch her down."

The loss of Hammond's peace did not threaten. The Major went up the stairs and Dick disappeared by way of the sitting room and kitchen. Somewhat later, Dick's horse passed the window at a trot, but its hoof beats turned into the rhythm of a gallop before he had reached the road. Hammond waited. There was nothing else to do. He grew ill at ease as the time elapsed and he speculated whether the girl had grown recalcitrant. The hauteur with which she had left the carriage and walked into the house might have been real.

Meg rolled solemn eyes toward his owner's face. He sensed a gravity in the situation which he did not understand. It was unthinkable to him that anybody, of whatever complexion, should seek to thwart his master's will, but he dared not speak or question. At length, unable longer to endure the uncertainty, he crawled to his feet and with a show of diffidence whispered in Hammond's ear.

"Yes, an' you has to. Go out behin' them hickories over there, but watch out for your clo's an' come right back," Hammond vouchsafed permission.

The bloodlessness of Blanche's face was emphasized by a coat of rice powder as she came down the stairs, followed by her father. It was apparent to Hammond that she had sought to repair the ravages of tears, but he was left to wonder whether she had wept because of first being forbidden him or because she was now commanded to marry him. She continued to wear the challis dress which in the eyes of her lover enhanced such beauty as she possessed. She could not have chosen a costume better to enchant him. Hammond did not know it was the best in her limited wardrobe, and assumed it was the woman and not her dress that caused him to believe her beautiful.

She was trembling and austere when he rose to meet her. She paused at the foot of the stairs and he went to take her in his arms. She neither resisted nor returned the kiss he gave her, but looked into his face with a resigned, sad smile.

Conversation was strained. "I thought you wouldn't come," she forced herself to say.

"You knowed I'd come. I say I would when you set the time."

"You say you send me a ring," she accused.

"I did. I sent it. Charles tote it."

"Charles!" She spoke it in a tone of such contempt as to indict Hammond of stupidity in his trust of her brother.

"Mayhap he dead. Mayhap he kilt a-comin'," Hammond sought to justify his confidence in her brother. "Like your mamma a-sayin'."

"By rights ought to be, though he ain't," said Woodford.

Blanche sat down on the divan. "I ain't got no dress," she apologized, shooting a withering glance at her father. "Papa didn't think you comin' an' wouldn't buy me none."

"I was waitin' fer that money to come," harped the old man.

"I ain't a-weddin' no dress," declared Hammond, unaware how much he had been taken in by the challis. "We kin buy dresses, all you craves of 'em—all you needs," he modified his estimate.

The vision of unlimited dresses enchanted the girl. She smiled with a faraway look and pictured herself in silks and laces and jewels in a baronial hall surrounded by adoring gallants, who kissed her hand, no longer red and stubby with broken and bitten nails. Always she would remain true to her lover-husband, spurning the hearts that she would break. All the dresses she craved!

The sound of the supper bell summoned her back to Crowfoot and reality.

Meg, who had come back promptly as instructed, was sent to the kitchen for food. The Major went in search of Beatrix, who had quietly vanished after her prayer. He returned discomfited and made his wife's excuses. In her apprehension of Charles' murder, she had retired with her grief and desired no supper, he said, although all knew that she resented her husband's assent to Blanche's marriage as much as she lamented the assumed death of their son.

The three went in. Hammond and Blanche sat on either side of the host, the empty chair across from him an accusation. The half-needed candles flickered in the dying daylight. There was a tentative tone to the talk, a constraint, an avoidance of the subjects closest to the speakers' thoughts. With pauses between subjects, which Blanche sought to hide with shy, flirtatious looks directed toward the boy across the table from her, the conversation ranged from the health of Hammond's father to the price of cotton, crop prospects, the weather, past, present and to come, the Negroes of Falconhurst and the rising market for them.

"Warren don't need no two hunderd head," opined Woodford. "Whyn't he sell off about half, the price they fetchin'?"

"We sells 'em when they grows. Took a coffle to the city las' autumn after pickin'; another ready to go, come fall. Most of ourn is saplin's, that is, an' suckers."

"I don' have no luck with suckers, seem like. Wenches won't bring 'em,

an' when they does they punies an' dies or somethin'."

"Papa don' have no stew with 'em, not much. Coursen, he say, an' he could buy 'em half-raised, the kin' he wants 'em, sound and straight bucks, he'd sell off the wenches an' not breed no more, he say, but on'y jest buy."

"Warren jest talkin'," scoffed Woodford.

"Jes' talkin', I reckons," Hammond agreed. "He likes 'em little-like. Likes to raise 'em. But more money in buyin' saplin's than in raisin' suckers, an' don' take so long. But a body cain't find 'em—likely ones."

"Ain't hard. They plenty, plenty," said Woodford with an expansive sweep of his hand, "an' you ready to pay fer 'em."

"I buy two yestiday—two right smart young mustees. On'y they got away, an' I don' know kin we bring 'em in." Hammond related the story of the boys' escape.

"I won't ride with 'em," declared Blanche with indignation. "I thinkin' you come to Briarfield to git me, an' you comes to buy niggers. You haulin' them niggers, I ain't a-goin' a step."

"You ain't a-goin' to haf to," sniffed her father. "Sime Maddox? Them niggers gits home, Sime a-goin' to hide 'em an' dispute ever seein' em'. Sell 'em over the other way, an' you'll never know."

"No white man do like that. That nigger stealin', jest like it," Hammond scoffed.

"Sime Maddox!"

"I 'on't keer. He haul niggers, I ain't a-goin'," repeated Blanche.

Her father patted her hand. "Now, now," he soothed her ire. "Ifn he find 'em, which he ain't goin', it won't injure you none, ridin' along. Ham done washed 'em, didn't you say? An' he not goin' to leave you alone with 'em—not fer a minute."

"Well," said the girl tentatively.

"He your husband, goin' to be. You got to do ever'thin' like he say, jest like he say, ever'thin'," the father admonished.

"She goin' to," said Hammond confidently.

For want of something else to do, they lingered at table after their hunger was satisfied. The night had grown dark and the moon had not risen. Shadows were cast against the wall by the saffron glow of the candles.

The party returned to the drawing room and sat, stiff and self-conscious, awaiting Dick's return with the preacher. From time to time, the Major, on the pretense of scanning the lane for riders, made his incidental way to the spring-house for a swallow of corn. On each return, he went upstairs and the young people were able to overhear his part of an argument with his wife, who remained adamant in her belief that Charles was dead and in her refusal to assent to her daughter's marriage. Her words were not audible, but from her husband's loud arguments it was possible to surmise what she was saying. She did not forbid the union, but refused any part in it, stubbornly placing the decision and any subsequent blame for it upon the tremulous

shoulders of the Major.

The sound of the impact of the hooves of a single horse upon the drive interrupted the stalemated argument, and by the time Dick had called a boy and surrendered his horse, the Major was coming down the stairs.

"Whure Jones?" the Major demanded as Dick entered the door.

"Sime Maddox, he's a-dyin'," the messenger explained.

"Let him die, but whure Jones?"

"Brother Ben out to Mista Maddox gittin' him ready, ready to meet his Maker," Dick elaborated.

"Anything of my mustees out there?" interposed Hammond. "They go home?"

"I never went. I knowed he wouldn't leave a dyin' man to come."

"Well I swan," swore the Major euphemistically in the presence of his daughter. "Why you calculate he wouldn't come? He won't git a cent out of Sime, not a cent, an' Hammon' here give him two, three, maybe five dollars. You fool, Dick, you god-damn fool. Now what we goin' to do?" He turned and went up the stairs again to report Dick's failure to Beatrix and to charge her with their son's stupidity.

"I ain't to blame I couldn't fetch him," Dick sought to absolve himself, dropping into a chair.

"Course," Hammond acknowledged.

Blanche dissolved in tears.

"Course he kin, good as any," the Major's voice from upstairs boomed with a new hope. "I fergot all about that. An' you'll come down, an' he do? An' give 'em your blessin'? Well, that whut we goin' to do."

Blanche wiped away her tears and raised her eyes toward her father as he came expansively down the stairs. She knew he had a way out of the difficulty. Hammond was resigned to whatever might happen, and Dick shrank from his father's indictment of his futility. Meg, once more on the floor at his master's feet, failed to fathom the impediment to the marriage, or to understand why his omnipotent master didn't surmount it, whatever it might be. Wedlock to him, whatever it might imply, required but two persons, and they were both present. His owner seemed to will it, but perhaps he did not. Perhaps that was why the beautiful white lady in the flowered dress was weeping.

"Dick!" announced the Major, slapping his sitting son on the shoulder. "Dick! Dick a preacher. He kin do it, do it good as any. He sanctified; he a preacher! Whyn't we think? Why we send fer Jones?"

"Papa! No!" objected his son to his father's solution. "No, I cain't. I'm jest a-startin' out. I cain't wed no white folks—never did."

"You kin, you kin!" protested his father. "Ain't no different marryin' white folks than niggers, on'y no broom. You kin do it! Hammon' gives you the money, jest like he would Jones."

"Reckon it legal?" Hammond was sceptical.

"Legal as Jones," opined the Major. "Dick's a preacher, ain't he? No matter he ain't preached to white folks yet. He a-goin' to. He say the words an' I write it in the Bible, you married, married fast."

"I don' know the lines," Dick protested.

"Ain't no difference whut you sayin'. Jest home folks! Besides, your mamma wants you. An' you do it, your mamma comin' downstairs to listen. She given in to it, an' Dick doin' it. You don't got to string it out. All you do is jest ast 'em an' tell 'em. Good practice."

The brown figure of Beatrix descended the stairs. All the blood was drained from her solemn face, leaving her more sallow than before. She approached her husband without speaking, extending toward him her hearing device.

"Dick not a-wantin' to," called the Major into the horn. "Says he cain't."

"Course he kin. Dick jest backward," said his mother emptily. "Goin' to be a preacher, got to start in bein' one. Come along, Son."

Dick struggled bashfully to his feet.

"Stan' up, Ham; stan' up, Blanche. Stan' together here in front of this window," the Major arranged the party. "You, Mamma, stan' right there by Blanche so as you kin hear good," he called into the horn.

Meg, ignored, arose also. He was unsure what was expected of him and half expected to be ordered back to the floor.

"I 'on't know. I reckon we got to kneel down first off," Dick improvised.

When all were firmly on their knees, Dick offered his prayer, coolly and without passion. He was so diffident that he had doubt of his words reaching to the Throne. "Dear God," he prayed, "We come together here before You to join together these white folks in wedlock, in holy matrimony," he repeated himself, uncertain of how to proceed. "We begs You to bless their union with long life an' joys an' comfortin' one another in they ol' age. We prays You goin' to 'stow on 'em Your benediction an' goin' to bring 'em childern to raise up to praise Thee. We prays You goin' to bring 'em childern an' that them childern goin' to be boys, Oh God, 'cause Hammon' here, he wants a boy to help him manage that plantation of his paw's an' to take it offen his hands when he goin' to die, Oh God.

"My sister Blanche here, she stubborn, Oh God. Thou knowest she stubborn, Oh God. Take it out of her heart, God; take that stubborn streak she got right outn her heart. Make her give in to her husban', God, an' do whut he say an' obey his commands, Oh God, like she had ought to.

"Bless this service of marri'ge, Oh God, an' make it legal; make it legal an' bindin' on 'em both. An' bless Thy servant an' his ministry an' his preachin' and deliver me from temptations of the flesh, so as I kin serve Thee.

"An bless my mamma an' my papa here. Shower down your blessin' on 'em an' on Charlie, if he alive. An' if he dead, save him from hellfire an' 'cept him into Your lovin' grace.

"An bless this little nigger of Hammond's an' all his niggers, an' all my

papa's niggers, Oh God. Increase 'em an' multiply 'em, an' make 'em obey they masters, Oh God, that they goin' to be released from they bondage when they die, Oh God, that they goin' to be free when they die.

"I reckon that all for now, Oh God. I don't bethink me of nothin' else. Jest do whut I'm askin', Oh God, in Jesus' name.

"Amen."

Dick spoke intimately to God and laid down his commands to Him, although he had no confidence tonight that they would be heeded. His words lacked the passion, the impetuous urgency, the fervor and the resonance to make themselves heard. God seemed far away and concerned with His own affairs.

"Amen," Beatrix nodded her approval as she got to her feet. "I was knowin' you could. On'y thing, you fergot of Cousin Warren. Glad you blessed your brother, whurever he is."

The Major caught his wife's eye and placed his finger to his lips to silence her.

"Well, you ready?" Dick inquired. "Does you, Hammon', take this lady name of Blanche to be your lawful, wedded wife, fer better or fer worse, in sickness and health, through weal or woe, to love an' proteck till death or distance do you part?"

"Yas, suh," Hammond nodded in assent.

"An' you, on your part, Blanche, do you accep' this Hammon' here to be your lawful wedded husban', fer better or fer worse, in sickness an' health, come weal, come woe, to love an' obey without no back-talk till death or distance goin' to part you?"

"I accep's him," promised Blanche firmly.

"Then that is all they is to it," affirmed Dick. "I goin' to announce you husban' an' his wife an' may God have mercy on your souls. Amen!"

Dick pumped the groom's arm and gingerly, reluctantly kissed the bride. The mother wept as she embraced the embarrassed couple and the father beamed his blessing.

"Ain't you goin' to kiss her?" Dick asked Hammond.

"He plagued, an' ever'body lookin'. Wait till they git alone," the Major condoned the omission. He grasped Hammond's arm with one hand and Dick's arm with the other, leading them out-of-doors and toward the spring-house.

Dick protested, " 'Tain't right. I'm a preacher. I'm temp'ance."

"Temp'ance this afternoon too, wasn't you?" asked the Major. "A cup of corn to celebrate your sister ain't a-goin' to sen' you to hell. Besides," he added, nudging his son-in-law in the ribs with his elbow, "Hammond goin' to need it."

Hammond did need it.

"Better leave 'em alone a spell together. Her mamma got to 'splain to your wife whut marryin' goin' to mean—whut kin' of son-of-a-bitches men is." Without being subtle, neither was the prurient old man forthright in his allu-

sions to the consummation of the marriage. The occasion provided license to his lickerishness, and corn whiskey loosed his tongue. The victim of his wife's prudery, if not of her frigidity, Major Woodford, among men, was alert to affirm the marital rights of the male, of which he no longer sought to avail himself.

Hammond was grateful for his father-in-law's restraint of his words, and for the confinement to the bosom of his acquired family the discussion of the intimacies of the marriage relation. He had feared a house full of guests and a charivari, and he was to be spared such ragging. Candor caused him no embarrassment, but to veiled allusions and euphemisms he found no words for reply. If her father chose to discuss his bride's defloweration with hints of levity, the husband and guest was in no position to resent it, and in fact did not know whether he ought.

Dick with his religious inhibitions was no less offensive than his sire. The libidinosity of his imagination was swathed in a stern morality, which his calling imposed upon him.

"No white man goin' to touch a lady, 'ceptin' he wantin' a chil'," he declared.

"Whut he goin' to do? You an' your preachin'!" scoffed the father. "You reckon I a-wantin' you—or Charlie, or a gal? You talks like your mamma."

" 'Tain't right, makin' a lady submit to your lustin's. 'Twasn' whut ol' Saint Paul meant at all. That whut niggers is fer. You kin use a wench, cain't you?"

"Some men ain't got no wench, or they too black or somethin'. Whut do you say to that?"

"Mos' gen'lemen got 'em—one or two anyways," Hammond declared himself mildly on the side of morality, which did not pertain to the unpropertied.

"Besides, it the law. The law givin' a man rights. Ain't nothin' fer a lady to say about," the Major chuckled as he clenched his argument. "They married, ain't they?"

"To increase an' multiply, they is. Yes, suh." Dick admitted, "But not fo' pleasurin'. That sin!"

"My only sin no more is corn whiskey," said the Major tossing off his fourth cup. "Help yourself. I reckon we better go in, afore my wife tellin' yourn to not let you in bed."

The men had tarried so long in the spring-house that the wives had gone upstairs. Meg had fallen asleep on the floor and Hammond had to shake him to wake him up. The Major escorted his new son-in-law to the door of Blanche's bedroom and went himself into the adjoining one where Beatrix could be heard still stirring restlessly.

Blanche was supine in her big bed, modestly swathed in a heavy nightdress buttoned at the neck. Hammond envisioned without seeing the whiteness, the marble pinkness, of his wife's blond body and the thought of contact with it revolted him. He was himself only slightly more rufous, and so used

was he to the sight of darker skins that to look down at the glabrous part of his own belly made him queasy, as if he were leprous or fetal. He had married Blanche for her racial purity, of which her blondness was his earnest, but he was grateful for the buttoned nightgown which absolved his eyes from the necessity to look upon the expanse of nacreous flesh, grateful for that white squeamishness which left so much of the female integument to male imagination.

It was apparent that the girl had been weeping, which her husband ignored. The sleep-sodden Meg removed his master's boots and socks, and helped him off with his outer clothes. He failed to understand but did not question why the white man retained his undergarments.

"Ain't no quilt laid out fer you. Got to sleep in your clo's; but sleep straight an' don' muss 'em," Hammond cautioned the boy, putting him down outside the door. "An' I goin' to lambaste you, I catches you at that keyhole, goin' to hang you up."

Meg lay down too weary, too sleepy, for curiosity. Why, anyway, should he be curious?

Later Meg was awakened by his master's stumbling over his sleeping figure. Hammond emerged from the room, dressed in his coat, socks and boots in his hand, and directed the half-sleeping boy to come along with him. They descended the stair and the master groped for a chair in which he sat while the slave dressed his feet. The master remained sitting, preoccupied and baffled. At last he rose, paced back and forth across the floor of the room, wandered to the door and paced the driveway. The young Negro, without knowing why, was as much distressed as his master, whom he sensed to be sorely troubled.

Hammond started toward the stables, resolved to harness his own horses without disturbing the slaves and to take his departure, when the side door opened and Dick inquired whether it was he and what the matter could be.

"I cain't sleep, an' I got up," was all the explanation Hammond would offer. "I has a lot of trouble that a-way, not a-sleepin'."

"It's that Blanche!" Dick divined. "Go back an' tell her, tell her she married, she married an' it her duty. Want I should go up with you, or call Papa?"

"No, it not that. I jest cain't go to sleep. Cousin Blanche, she sleepin' soun'. Go back to bed," Hammond answered in a half voice. His resolution to escape was broken. He wandered the agonized night alone. Meg sat on the edge of the gallery and dozed.

Hammond was grateful to Mercury when the planet rose above the trees, an assurance that morning was not far off. He strolled unseeingly down the lane and into the silent road toward Briarfield. At the first light he turned and retraced his steps toward Crowfoot. He sat on the edge of the gallery floor beside his sleeping minion, for whom the owner felt a new and fierce affection. Upon Meg's loyalty he could count. For all his stupidity, ignorance, childish innocence, for all his mischievous lying and braggadocio to others,

he was, as he proclaimed, Hammond's nigger, as steadfast as Lucretia Borgia herself.

Stirring began. Young Negroes crossed the area to the well. Blue smoke rose from cabin chimneys. Katy came from Dick's room and ambled toward the quarters. The plantation day had begun. Hammond dreaded the arrival of the Woodfords, with their unasked questions and ribald curiosity. He was grateful for Beatrix's deafness. Would Blanche demand why he had left her bed, or would she care?

Hammond looked up and saw the Major in the doorway, beaming and cheerful. The older man confined his comments to the fineness and largeness of the morning and to an insinuating inquiry about Ham's health and how he had slept. Hammond ignored the insinuation and admitted that he had not slept well and had risen early, but did not say how early.

"How Blanche?" hinted her father. "She comin' down—time for breakfast?"

"I reckon," said Hammond.

"I right plagued not to have a fancy weddin', but I wrote it in Beatrix's Bible. It will hold."

"I obliged you didn't go to nothin' fancy," declared Hammond.

"Couldn't. That money didn't come. I couldn't. And I cain't make you no present, Beatrix and me. Had ought to, I knows. Plagues Blanche's mamma."

" 'S all right. Nothin' I's a-wantin,' savin' your gal, savin' Blanche."

"Had ought to give you a wench fer her—least I could do. Looks bad. Don't know whut Warren goin' to reckon."

"Him an' me already got one of ourn picked out fer her. He don't 'spect nothin'."

"You know how it is. Hands all mortgaged. Cain't part with 'em. Course, you wantin' to take up the mortgage an' pay it, help yourself. Take any of 'em, any I got," the Major made a show of generosity which he knew would be rejected. "Consarn that Charlie!"

Whatever aspect of cheerfulness, real or assumed, the others brought to the breakfast table, Beatrix's austerity of manner canceled out. Her reluctance to part with her daughter was aggravated by her conviction that marriage at its best was for women a sorrow only less evil than spinsterhood. Her own had been. All night she had envisioned Blanche's pure body at the mercy of male bestiality and had wept for her. Her horror of marriage as an institution embraced a resentment of the man to whom her daughter was married. She was at once impelled to implore him to restrain his appetite, which being male she knew to be gross, and was restrained by a womanly decorum that forbade allusion to such a theme. Nor could she bring herself to suggest to Blanche that she demand forbearance from her husband.

Blanche's solemn visage was not, as her mother believed, inspired by Hammond's ardor but rather by his lack of it which had moved him to forsake

her bed after scarcely an hour with her. Her dreams of married bliss had encompassed no such velleity.

The team was waiting, harnessed to the surrey, by the time breakfast was finished, but the departure for which Hammond was impatient was delayed by Blanche's preparation. Beatrix interspersed her demure hints, her veiled questionings, her warnings, suggestions, counsel and advice into her daughter's packing of her limited wardrobe into a capacious carpetbag, which was to serve as her single article of luggage. Beatrix's deafness made most of Blanche's replies to her supererogatory, since she was unable to hear them. Blanche acknowledged her mother's admonitions with nods of her head and movements of her lips, some of which Beatrix was able to interpret. Seldom did the girl interrupt her work to go to the bed on which the elder woman sat to shout into her trumpet. Much as the mother regretted the parting, the daughter had no qualms at leaving her home, which meant to her a pleasant adventure with a rich husband and a promise of luxury.

It was approaching ten o'clock before Blanche was fully ready to go. The men spent the intervening time in gossip and visits to the spring-house, although Dick, in an upsurge of virtue, refused to join his father and brother-in-law in their libations.

Blanche descended the stairs, again in the same challis dress, followed by the house-boy with the carpetbag, which he stowed in the rear seat of the vehicle. Beatrix, in an effort further to delay the separation, proposed family prayers, for which Hammond declared himself to be unable to wait and to which Blanche was as loath to be subjected as was her husband.

"Git yourself up in that back seat an' watch that valise," his master admonished Meg. "Set up and don't scrunch down, 'cause you ridin' with your mist'ess."

"Ain't you fergittin'?" Dick demanded with a show of diffidence. At Hammond's questioning lift of the brows, Dick added, "Fer pronouncin' that weddin'. Ain't you goin' to pay? Course, you don' got to; I ain't a-astin' nothin'."

Hammond delved into his pocket for his poke. "I sure like to fergotten," he said, fingering among the coins. "Glad you remembered me." Unable to find a five dollar piece, which he deemed adequate payment for the ceremony, he forked over a ten dollar piece.

"Too much, too much," protested the preacher, nevertheless quickly pocketing the money.

"Keep it, keep it all. Reckon we kin 'ford it. All in the family, anyways, now."

Hammond's statement gave the Major a hope of the access of any Woodford to the Maxwell hoard.

Dick withdrew the coin from his pocket and, after polishing it on his trousers, extended it on his upright palm toward his mother. "The first preacherin' money!" he said with pride. "I goin' to keep it fer seed."

With mutual reluctance, Beatrix and Hammond exchanged a kiss. "God bless you!" she said. "Be good to her, Cousin Hammond, an' don' be too demandin'." She folded her daughter in her arms, kissing her again and again, while Hammond shook the hands of the Major and the preacher. Dick gave Blanche a dutiful peck upon the cheek and her father, after planting a kiss upon her brow, ostentatiously withdrew a soiled handkerchief and wiped his eyes, in which no tears were visible. There was no pretense about the paroxysm of dry sobs which beset Beatrix as Hammond handed his wife into the surrey. The mother entertained no regrets for the match, but the separation from her youngest child moved her to an emotion which she didn't know whether was sadness or satisfaction.

Hammond climbed into the driver's seat and unwound the reins from around the whip. The Negro groom stepped away from the horses' heads and the mares swung into a trot. As they traversed the lane toward the road, Blanche did not look back. She had no will to linger in parental durance.

The horses sensed that they were headed homeward and Hammond, eager for news of his escaped slaves, gave them their heads. The fine weather had dried the roads and reduced the ruts so much that the fast pace did not cause the carriage to bump and sway unduly.

"You ain't sayin' nothin'. Ain' you glad?" asked the girl.

"Glad?" questioned the preoccupied husband.

"Glad we married, glad we goin'?" she elucidated.

Hammond made no reply. When Blanche reached over and threw her arms about his neck, he shook her off and rolled his eyes in a glance into the rear seat to warn her of the presence of the slave apt to mark her indecorum.

"I your wife, ain't I?" Blanche defended her behavior.

"I reckon you is," Hammond admitted, but was reluctant to speak further.

"Whut fer you gittin' up las' night? You didn't git no sleep," the girl pressed the theme.

"I's like that. I cain't sleep, seem like, when I thinkin'."

"You thinkin'? Whut you thinkin' about? You so funny."

"I thinkin', I wonderin' whut man had you afore me. You not believin' I doesn't know a virgin."

"I was too a virgin," the girl declared.

"Oncet," said her husband succinctly. "But not las' night."

Blanche began to weep, but her husband was indifferent to her tears. He turned and looked at the boy behind him, cautioning him to watch the carpetbag. He was less concerned about the bag, in fact, than about Meg's comprehension of the conversation in the front seat. The boy had strained his ears to hear, knew there was dissension, but failed to understand what it was about. Meg sat back in the seat with an assumption of innocence. Whatever might be the cause of the strife, he knew that the right was on the side of his master.

"Hammon' Maxwell, you 'cusin' me of sompin' I never done. I never

done it, I never done it, I never," reiterated Blanche. What other rebuttal to the charge could she have made?

"You ain't a-tellin' me." Hammond doubted the girl's denial. "You don't reckon I ain't know a virgin when I see one—when I sleeps with one an' pleasures?"

"No! No! No!" she cried and broke afresh into tears.

"Ain't no good of me sayin' and you sayin' not, but I knowin'. You cain't deny."

Blanche heaved a long sigh.

"Might jest as well tell me, tell me who it is. Mayhap I goin' to kill the son-a-bitch, shoot him down jest like he a skunk or somethin'. You might as well."

"I tellin' you there weren't nobody. I pure—till you."

"Me? I got the leave; I married to you. On'y had I have knew las' night, beforehan', I wouldn't of—wouldn't of married you."

"Hammon', Hammon', how you goin' to think sich a thing? How kin you?" She leaned toward him and embraced his neck, sought to find his mouth with hers, but he turned his face to avoid her kiss. She knew he was not convinced.

Once she was tempted to blurt out the truth but bit her tongue. If he knew, perhaps he might forgive, her veniality was so little and so long ago. That is why she hated Charles and Charles her, that was the tale she held over her brother's head with a threat to tell it. She had been but thirteen and Charles scarcely two years older. They had been playing at keeping house, she the mother and he the father, her doll for a child. It had seemed at the time innocent enough although both knew that such an act was forbidden. Charles in his play had insisted upon his rights as her husband while she mimicked her mother's frigidity, although she could not disguise her enjoyment of her violation. It had occurred so long ago. How could her husband know and hold it against her? If Charles had been available, if anybody knew where he was, she might have told Hammond what she had withheld so long from her parents. Would Hammond shoot Charles and be satisfied? A good riddance.

But she didn't tell and was adamant, categorical, well-nigh convincing in her denial. How did Hammond know that she had not been a virgin? What caused him to suspect? She did not envision his education with Sukey, Aphrodite, Big Pearl, Ellen and all the other women who had shared his bed at one time or another.

She sat tremulous in the fear that her husband would reject her, cast her off, return her to Crowfoot. No other man would have her now that her marriage to Maxwell would be known, could not be concealed. Her maidenhead, the most precious jewel of a marriageable woman, would be recognized as gone. That Hammond did not turn back convinced her of his doubt, of his conviction if not of his assurance, of her veracity.

But Hammond had no doubt, not to mention assurance.

Conversation had ceased but speculation had not. The duet of the horses' thud upon the dirt of the road beat out a monotonous melody. The recovery of his slaves no longer had any meaning for their owner. He tortured his mind only with his wife's debasement. The horses guided themselves, onward, homeward. Hammond did not turn them back toward Crowfoot. There was no turning back.

At length he spoke. "Well, we-all married—I reckon. Ain't nothin' we kin do—now. We married," he repeated. "We got to make the best of that."

Blanche felt the anomaly of her status, but was relieved that her husband accepted it. She sighed.

"But we mustn't tell my papa nothin' about it. He ain't never goin' to know you wasn' pure. Bust his heart, bus' it right open—thinkin' of Falconhurst goin' to the son of a ——," he searched his mind for a word but found none he could apply. "Like you," he concluded his sentence.

Her half-forgotten childhood defection from virtue had seemed to Blanche a mere peccadillo, but she knew now that it was not. Her husband accepted her, but accepted her as something used, smirched, tawdry, second-hand.

She had envisioned no early continence in the man she should marry. The concept would have startled if it had not revolted her. She knew her brothers' ways with the wenches and suspected her father's. The satisfactions of their lusts was a male prerogative to which no blame was to be attached. But why the restriction on female appetence? Why the fiction that it did not exist? What was a virgin? How did the man know?

She foresaw herself as forever suspect, unable to offer objection to anything her husband chose to do. She had envisaged no such denouement to the accident, the trivial accident, that had occurred years before, as she had conceived of no such cause for her husband's forsaking her bed and wandering the roads in the moonlight. But at least he had not rejected her, had not cast her off. He was driving forward, carrying her onward toward Briarfield and Falconhurst.

"Wonderin' whether that Maddox snare them mustee niggers," Hammond shifted the subject. "We comin' into Briarfield purty quick. Reckon you hongry fer dinner?" When he got no reply he called affably to Meg in the rear seat, "Gittin' hongry, boy? Hold onto your guts; it won't be long an' ol' Marth goin' to have a panful waitin' fer you."

Blanche resentfully hoped that the slaves had not been caught. She was in no position now to take exception to carrying them in the surrey—no position to object to anything her husband henceforth might choose to do.

The horses clattered over the wooden bridge that spanned the muddy creek and into Briarfield. At the Maddox House, Hammond got down and helped Blanche to alight before he took the horses to the stable and instructed Fred to feed them. Eph Maddox waited at the door as Hammond recrossed the road, followed by his Negro, and joined his bride.

"You're kinder late a-comin' but I knowed you would. I've saved dinner," Maddox greeted them.

"Did you git them niggers? Did you ketch 'em?" Hammond demanded, more interested in his investment than in food.

"Sime a-failin' fast. He is low, but still alive—wuz this mornin' when I had to come."

Hammond signaled his sympathy with a slow shaking of his head and repeated his question, "Did you ketch my niggers?"

Maddox nodded his shoulders and threw open his bedroom door. "I cornered 'em all right. This mornin' early they lurkin' in Sime's haymow. The littler run, but when he seen I collared the bigger 'un, he come in an' leaved me take him."

The captives were on their knees, fettered to a post of the bed. The younger clung to his elder brother as they retreated as far as their chains would let them, and a light of green fear, the fear of trapped animals, shot from their pupils and demarcated them from the surrounding black of the irises. Their hickory clothes were as strong as the dealer had claimed, for they were still whole, but the brown of their dye was dirty and spotted.

The scarecrow manner in which their garments hung from their long legs and arms made the boys appear more emaciated than before. Their visible flesh, their feet and faces and hands, was as dirty as before Martha had bathed them, and their lank hair was matted and snarled again.

Some scraps of food in an oblong, rusty, iron pan on the floor beside the bed was evidence that the boys had been fed.

"I washin' my hands," warned Maddox. "They yourn now. You watch 'em. I never warranted they wouldn' run."

"I sure obliged fer gittin' 'em," said their owner.

"Sime's wife, she for hidin' 'em out till after you go through an' sellin' 'em again. But I put my foot down an' brought 'em in. I ain't a-goin' to mix in no nigger stealin'," Maddox affirmed with conscious self-righteousness. "Remember, that note you owe is payin' to me, not to Sime's wife an' he don' git up."

Hammond was aware to whom his note was payable. He went forward, grasped Ace's arm, and ordered him to "Git up." Trump got to his feet along with his brother. Both trembled and looked furtively at the stern man who controlled their destiny. They knew what that immediate destiny would be. It was useless to try to shirk it.

"Better eat first, afore the vittles gits cold," suggested Maddox. "I left it fer you. Never touched 'em, 'ceptin' to kick the big one aroun' a little. Reckoned you'd want to do it yourself."

"Sure glad to see them varmints," Hammond sighed his satisfaction. "Sure hate to 'fess to my papa I bought two an' let 'em run on me—both on 'em."

Blanche's interest in the recovered slaves was negative and she waited in

the office room while Hammond looked at them. She was glad of his absorption in them, because it took his attention from a less pleasant subject. He rejoined her and they entered the dining room.

"Um! Um!" grunted Martha, bringing food from the kitchen. "Purty white lady! You married her, Masta, suh? Um! Um! Sho' purty lady. Sho' a spacious couplin'."

Hammond acknowledged the spirit of the black woman's congratulations.

"Sho' enough," said Maddox, who had followed into the dining room, "You two got mar'd, didn't you? Wish you joy, ma'am; wish you joy, suh."

Blanche blushed and Hammond thanked the speaker.

"Jones, I reckon? I don' calc'late whure he found the time, bein' at Sime's all Sunday."

"Richard. Miz Maxwell's brother done it." It was the first time Hammond had called his wife so.

"Richard? You mean Dick Woodford, the ol' Major's boy?" Maddox slapped his thigh in laughter. "That ain't a-goin' to hol'. Why, don't you know Dick ain't no preacher, not no real preacher?"

"Dick rode fer Jones, but couldn't fetch him; so he done it hisself," Hammond explained. "Done it purty good too, an' I does say."

"All right fer niggers, Dick is. He kin jump them over a broomstick. Cain't marry them no way; ain't no sech thing. But white folks? Dick a-marryin' whites?"

Blanche dropped her fork in her confusion lest the man convince her husband that the marriage was not valid. A poor thing now, but it was better than no marriage; if it were voided now, no other man would ever marry her.

"Major Woodford writ in the Bible," argued the husband. "That had ought to legal it, if nothin' else."

"Meybe, meybe so," half-conceded Maddox. "But I'd have Jones do it over an' make it tight. Cain't be too careful 'bout takin' a woman. Don' want no talk."

"Ain't a-goin' to be none," Hammond bristled. "Better not be no talk! Who is it a-goin' to say—?"

Maddox hastened to withdraw his aspersions. "I ain't," he declared. "Reckon one preacher good as another, 'specially the lady's brother."

Reference to her brother quickly connoted Charles to Blanche if it did not to Hammond. One of her brothers had marred her marriage as certainly as the other had made it. However, the test of it had come and Hammond had verified it. There was no danger now that he would try to back out of it.

The girl was disturbed and ate little, but she noticed that Hammond's appetite was not impaired. Meg ate in the kitchen.

To Hammond's inquiry about his indebtedness, Maddox rolled his eyes upward in his calculations. "About—about a dollar an' two bits," he said, "that is fer all, really ought to be four bits, way them hongry mustees et. Goin'

to Sime's anyways an' no charge fer bringin' 'em in. But let 'em git away from you agin, an'——."

Hammond paid without cavil.

Maddox followed him into the bedroom where the slaves were chained and unlocked the chain to the bedpost. "I like to buy one set of these spancels fer the big one. The little one won't run. I kin hol' him."

"Take it along, an' sen' it back. No call to buy it. You got plenty at home, I reckon."

"Sure you ain't goin' to need 'em?"

"Whut fer? Don' aim to chain ol' Marth," Maddox laughed at the idea. "Jest keep 'em fer drivers an' passers through. But sen' 'em back, first chance. Put the key in your pants."

Hammond removed the fetters from Trump's ankles and cautioned him not to run. Ace followed the white men with short clanking steps and Trump brought up the rear.

"Jackson over at the stable got ever'thin' you need—rings to hang 'em from, a long snake an' salt an' pepper. That lazy Fred will do it fer you fer two bits, two bits apiece. He slothful, but does a good whuppin' job. Loves to tear the hide off—'specially light ones. Miz Maxwell kin rock here until you come back. Rock an' rest. She don' wants to watch, I reckon. Rock an' rest an' listen to the varmints holler."

Maddox's speech was impossible to interrupt. Hammond hesitated in indecision. "I reckon I'll wait. Take 'em home an' use the paddle. Burns worse 'an the snake without tearin' 'em as much. A scarred back don't bring nothin' hardly, go to sell one."

"Fer you to say," said Maddox disappointedly. "But to cure 'em, had ought to flog 'em quick, 'fore they fergits whut it fer. Fred, if you craves, will do it light, jest a buggy whip an' you kin lay it on when you gits 'em whure you goin'."

Ace had begun to weep. He was on his knees in terror and kissing his master's hand in mute supplication.

Hammond, vexed with the boy's cravenness, withdrew his hand and wiped the back of it on his trousers. "They won't never disremember an' I drubs 'em. They won't run no more, you kin lay to it." The young man even in his threats recalled the nausea he had experienced at his whipping of Memnon and the tears he had sobbed on his pillow afterward. He knew that absconding slaves had to be whipped but he did not relish the thought of doing it and refused to delegate the chore. It it were to be done, he would at least superintend it, retch and weep as he might.

He propelled Ace, hindered by his fetters from taking long steps, slowly across the road and locked him to the rear footplate of the carriage. Trump followed, clinging to his elder brother's sleeve. There was little likelihood of his escaping alone, but Hammond took the precaution to place him in the middle of the seat between Ace and Meg, who sat as far as he was able

toward the side of the vehicle to avoid contamination and whose interest in these impedimenta was emphasized by a pointed determination to ignore them. Blanche glanced scornfully at the mustees as her husband helped her to her place, but she advisedly withheld any comment about them.

A light breeze had sprung up and a film of cloud, little more than haze, blighted the sun's brilliance. Hammond raised his eyes to survey the weather before he stepped into the driver's seat. "Might shower," he prognosticated. "Mayhap not afore mornin'. Could be, we git home first."

Food and drink had refreshed the horses and they set out with a will. They, too, appeared to sense the change in the air, which impelled them to seek home and shelter. Driving them implied only restraining them that the surrey should not sway and bounce over the ruts and thank-you-ma'ams of the little traveled road.

Blanche wondered whether Hammond's silence was directed toward her frailty. His thoughts, however, were on something else.

"I reckon we goin' to stop by Miz Church," at length he spoke.

"Miz Church? Who she?" Blanche asked.

"Miz Church? She a lady, a widder lady, who got a little farm on a piece but afore Fairfax."

"Why? Whut fer we stoppin'? Thinkin' you cravin' to git there—to git home."

Hammond suppressed a snigger at his scheme. "She got a boy, Miz Church, who hankerin' fer a nigger, a bright 'un. I ain't knowin' has she got the money, but mayhap she buyin' one of these back there behin'. If I'd a thought, I'd a had 'em washed agin an' combed back there at Briarfiel'."

"You an' your nigger tradin'!" Blanche scoffed, at once relieved and disappointed that his thoughts had not been fixed on her.

"It ain't tradin'—not 'zackly. I never knowed were they runners when I was a-buyin' 'em. Ifn I kin sell off one fer enough—or purty close—to git the othern free, fer nothin'—" Hammond outlined his plan. He was certain the boys were worth in the market much more than he had paid for them, but if he could sell one for the price he had paid for both, his father could utter no criticism—or think none—of his bringing home a boy with the propensity to run. He was doubtful of the Churches' disposition to buy his wares, even more of their means, but he was confident of his welcome, and the project was worth a trial.

"I don' wants to visit; I ain't fixed," Blanche objected.

"Don' got to fix none to go see Miz Church. She right common—a nice lady, but common-like. Besides, you look purty—in that sprigged dress," the first praise Hammond had bestowed upon his wife, and it caused her self-consciously to adjust her skirt.

The fanning zephyr, which had grown, and the mare's-tail that bedimmed the sun betokened a widespread, bland rain, which soon began to fall. The wind carried tiny drops through Blanche's side of the carriage. They stood,

a fine mist, on Blanche's dress and then soaked in to dank it, more over the left thigh than the right. The rain distressed her, more in the fear of harm to her garment than to her health, and she was glad enough to turn in at the Church farm and be out of such weather.

Madison, on his way from the barn to the house, stopped in his tracks when he recognized the equipage, then galloped gleefully down the path to meet it halfway. "My frien', my frien'," he cried, "Mista Maxwell. Mamma, come quick! It Mista Maxwell come back." He reached into the carriage in his exuberance to grasp Hammond's arm and to pound him on the shoulder. He took hold of the horses' bridles and trotted in front of the team toward the house.

By the time he reached the house, Mrs. Church, her hand encased in one leg of a pair of Mad's drawers which she was engaged in mending, had opened the door and stepped upon the gallery. "Laws, if it ain't," she exclaimed in her enthusiasm. "Mad's right glad, an' so are we all, a-seein' you. An' this your wife? Ain't she purty an' sweet an' innocent! Come in! Come in outn this weather."

"This Miz Maxwell. She goin' to be my wife," Hammond presented Blanche, ignoring the older woman's recognition.

"Well, I declare. Come and git outn the rain. I wisht Mad would—would find him a nice, pure woman, like that." Mrs. Church shook her head in despair. "You has to put up Mista Maxwell's span, Mad. Ain't no niggers when you wants 'em; never is."

"We'll barn 'em, Mamma. Mista Maxwell goin' along with me."

"Bad time fer honeyin', all this weather," observed Mrs. Church tentatively. "But mayhap, after all, it ain't! Jest sich a time me an' Wash Church took off from my paw, up in Tennessee," she reminisced, with a faraway glance that seemed to transport her in time and distance. "If you're a-lovin', you never bother a little rain."

"Jest bin a-callin' Too Sweet in out of the wet. Give him a handful of oats to cod him along," Mad explained what had taken him to the barn previously. He walked between Hammond and his team, leading both. The slaves remained in the rear seat of the surrey; Mad failed to notice them until the party reached the barn.

"Ain't a-needin' to unhitch. Cain't stay," said Hammond.

"Cain't?" Mad demanded, surprise and desolation in his voice. "In this rain? Might as well light here as in Fairfax. You git as much."

Hammond was sure of his welcome. "We'll see, an' it don't ease up," he half promised.

"I seein' you still got the one with gol' buttons," said Mad extending his arms to help Meg from the carriage. "But who the white boys? Come along."

"They not white; they mustees," their owner corrected. "Jest bought 'em."

"Mustees? Mustees come high!"

"Thinkin' o' you, knowin' you wantin' a bright-skinned buck."

"You, a-thinkin' 'bout me?" Mad nibbled at the flattery. Nobody had previously done anything with Mad specifically in mind.

"You kin have 'em, either one you wants."

"This one chained," announced Mad, as if making a discovery. "It don' like that. Why you chain it?"

"I cripped, you know. He tries to run, I cain't kotch him."

"Oh!" Mad uttered in commiseration for Ace. "It not goin' to run—from you. Unlock the spancels an' it go in the house with us."

"He all right, like he is," said Hammond. "Leave him be in the buggy."

"The little one, it won't run, eh? It kin go in."

"An' you wants him to," said Hammond. "He not washed."

"How much you wants fer 'em?" Mad inquired eagerly; then in despair said, "My mamma won't buy me nothin'."

"Seven hunert an' fifty fer the big one—fer you; an' five hunert fer the little one, I reckon 'bout right," Hammond named tentative prices. "Bein' they mustees—"

"They soun'?"

"Shuck 'em an' you wants. They skinny, ain't been fed; but they soun', savin' some whip marks on that littler one's back—jest horsewhup welts that's healin'." Hammond lowered Trump's galluses and removed his shirt, exposing his scarred shoulders.

"Who ever do that to a purty thing like that?" Mad asked with rhetorical sympathy. "You never, suh?"

"He had 'em. They dryin' up." The vendor rubbed his palm against the marred surface in a futile effort to erase the scars.

Mad ran his hand through Trump's matted hair and drew it away from his face. "I'd ruther—the little one," he chose wistfully. "But my mamma won't. Ain't no use. She won't; you'll see, she won't."

"I ain't a-urgin'; but I thinkin' of you."

"Want I run an' jump?" Trump asked his owner.

"Behave!" cautioned Hammond.

Mad caressed the injured back with its sharp blades. The wheals, so far from marring the bargain, were an added lure. Mad believed he could so heal them that they would never be detected and so doing, cancel the pain that their infliction had caused. They were a challenge to his empathy. "Tch! Tch! Tch!" he clucked, shaking his head.

"Ain't nothin! Jes' a little larrupin'—not with no snake," Hammond advanced. "Dryin' right up."

"It got a name? Whut you call it?" Mad quizzed, as if the name were an integral part of the slave.

No knowledge of etymology prompted the owner to say "Triumph," which sounded enough like Trump that the young slave would never know that his name was changed. Hammond had but a faint concept of what a triumph might be, and Madison none at all. Hammond would have named the boy

Trumpet or Strumpet just as readily if the words had occurred to him.

"If it jist had gold buttons, like yourn."

"Why, they kin swop they troggs, ifn yourn kin git into 'em. Meg, you shuck down."

The boy looked fixedly at his master, sucked on his under lip, and removed his jacket. Tears welled to his eyes as he slid from his breeches. He interpreted the removal of the uniform as a deprivation of his office and of his status as his master's own servant. He sought to salvage his shoes and long, white, dirty stockings, but was ordered to take them off.

The exchange of habiliment transformed Trump into a Triumph. He was larger than Meg, particularly longer of arm and leg, and seemed to burst out of the brass-buttoned jacket. The stockings wrinkled on his spare legs, although he had a struggle to force his longer feet into Meg's shoes. The garments Triumph had taken off hung on Meg even more slackly than on the larger boy; only the galluses kept the trousers from slipping off.

Mad saw no incongruity in the fit of Triumph's clothes and was indifferent to Meg's. He was more concerned with the buttons than with the flesh beneath them. Leaving Ace chained to the carriage step, Mad grasped Triumph's hand and bounded off at a gallop toward the house. Hammond followed more leisurely through the rain with Meg, struggling with his clothes to keep them on.

"Mista Maxwell brung me a little nigger, Mama!" Mad burst through the door into the room where Mrs. Church was seeking to establish a conversation with Blanche. "Whut you reckon to that? Mista Maxwell bin thinkin' 'bout me, 'bout me. He see this nigger an' want I should have it. Didn't you, Mista Maxwell?" he sought confirmation as Hammond entered.

"I never knowed an' you'd cotton to it. Kindly reckoned," Hammond answered with more diffidence than in discussing the trade with Mad alone.

Mrs. Church surveyed the slave casually. "'Tain't big enough," she objected. "I wants one, an' I goin' to lay out fer it, big enough to kindly take up with Emmaline."

"I got a bigger one, but he higher," said Hammond. "Big enough to take up."

"No, no, no, Mamma, no," Mad pouted. "I wants this one. It named Triumph; ain't it, Mista Maxwell? T'other 'un ain't got gol' buttons or nothin'. I wants this 'un."

"My paw, up in Kentucky," Mrs. Church explained, ignoring her son, "he raises mules. An' he ever die, Madison kin have all the yaller niggers he always a-cravin'. Paw never forgive me a-runnin' off with Wash Church, don' know yet Wash jump in the well. Mad know well and good he cain't buy no more niggers until his grandpa die."

"Well, ain't no harm," Hammond apologized. "I knowin' Mad a-cravin' a bright-skin boy."

"He a-cravin' all right. All the good it do."

"Mamma, Mamma," Mad whined. "You got money. I knows you got money. On'y five hunert dollars, all Mista Maxwell a-askin'. You got that much put away."

"The little we got, got to las', till Granpa die an' you git his plantation an' mules an' niggers. Mad cain't un'erstan' he got to wait. He never see his grampa."

Still holding Triumph by the hand, Mad sank on the floor beside his mother's chair and laid his cheek against her knees. "Buy me this nigger, please, ma'am; buy me this nigger. I's a-wantin' it bad."

The woman ran her gnarled fingers through her son's hair and caressed the heavy jowl. "You kin feed it an' play with it tonight," she sighed. "Mista Maxwell give you leave, I reckon. Maybe your grampa goin' to die soon, an' you kin buy you one. Always is niggers. You ain't havin' to have this one."

"But I wants it, Mamma. Look; gol' buttons an' ever'thin'. I'll cry, Mamma; I goin' to cry."

"Don't cry, don' cry, Mad, don' cry," the mother pleaded in terror.

"I a-goin' to," Madison continued to threaten.

Tears were Mad's big artillery. He knew their effect upon his mother. He was not sure that he could summon them, but he contorted his features. Still on his knees, he drew away from his mother's lap petulantly and embraced Triumph about the thighs, burying his face in the boy's jacket. After three or four deep, effortful sobs, the tears gushed from his eyes. He continued hiding his face until he was sure his eyes were red. He lifted his head and squeezed out more tears, permitting them to trickle down his copious cheeks. He got to his feet and, looking accusingly at the despondent woman, averred, "You won't ever git me nothin'. My papa done jump in the well a-cause of you."

It was not an overt threat, yet the splenetic youth stalked out the door and closed it with a bang. His fast steps on the gallery floor retreated toward the barnyard where was the well in which his father had drowned himself.

Mrs. Church shrieked, helpless. "Don't let him, don't let him! Save him!" she cried. "My boy, my boy!"

It was futile for Hammond with his stiff knee to attempt to overtake Mad. Perhaps, he thought, he could rescue him once he had thrown himself in the well, and he started to follow him. Before he could reach the door, Mrs. Church was before him in pursuit of her son. "Come back, Mad; come back, Mad. Don't do it, Mad!" she screamed. "I'll buy it. I'm a-goin' to. I will, Mad. Don't jump, Mad; don't. Come back an' I'll do it. Anything, anything, anythin' you a-wantin'."

Madison stopped and turned. "I ain't comin' back till you do it. You say, an' after I back you won't never," he said coolly.

"I will, Mad. I will right now. I'll git the money an' you kin buy it. Come back."

Madison walked slowly back, a brash smile on his tear-stained face. The

mother waited on the gallery until the boy was within her reach. Then she drew him toward her and kissed him thrice, to which he submitted without show of any emotion.

"I ain't never say I goin' to jump. I on'y jest say my papa done jump," the youth laughed sneeringly. "But you done promise, an' you don' keep it, I will; I tellin' you I will."

"I keepin' it. I keepin' it. Let me git the money. Don't jump, Mad, don't never jump. Your mamma do as much as she kin. Don' never jump." Mrs. Church's face had lost all color and her hands trembled as she went into the room where Grandma and the idiot stayed, to get her hoard of money, which she kept in a split basket, hidden beneath the idiot's bed. The basket sagged with the weight of coins as she brought it into the living room, took her wonted chair, and emptied its contents, a jumble of rags, gold and silver coins of various denominations, and greenbacks, wadded and crinkled, into her capacious lap.

"Five hunert dollars, you a-sayin', didn't you?" she looked up at Hammond. "You doesn't reckon you kin make it no cheaper? I knows they comes high—mustees."

"I tellin' Madison that much, five hunert." Hammond was tempted to reduce the price.

"Don't jew him, Mamma. I wants a five hunert dollar one. I don't wants a no cheaper one," Mad interposed.

Mrs. Church inhaled a long breath and looked at the heap in her lap. "I reckon I got that a-much," she sighed and began straightening, sorting and counting the money. "I don' trus' them bankin' folks. Always a-bustin' jest when you want it back."

"Neither don't my papa," agreed Hammond.

The woman looked up from her task and asked, "I reckon that nigger soun'? You warrants him?"

"He soun'! I seen him nekid," Mad insisted, in his anxiety to consummate the deal.

"Savin' some whip marks, a-healin'," specified Hammond, meticulous. "An' I ain't a-warrantin' that he won't run. Not a-warrantin'." He said nothing about the escape from Briarfield.

"Mad don' know," said his mother. "Wouldn't know whether it a buck or a slut."

"It a buck. I ain't a-wantin' no slut, cain't stomach 'em," Mad protested.

"More here than I reckoned, more 'an I knowed," mused Mrs. Church, straightening a pile of bills on her knee. "There. Five hunert. A lot of money fer jes' one, an' it not growed."

Mad took the pile from his mother's hand and gave it to Hammond.

"Better count it. I ain't very good at it," said Mrs. Church, stuffing the remainder of her money back into the basket. "Got to git at the rest some-

day. If only it las' till Paw dies. I reckon we be all right, an' come good cotton this year."

Hammond counted the money twice, and found himself overpaid by fifteen dollars, which he returned.

"I glad it too much. I'd a bin right plagued an' it bin too little," Mrs. Church accepted the overplus and put it under the rags in the basket, which she deposited beside her chair. "Couldn't never count an' Madison cain't. Takes after me, that way. Wash Church didn't never make a mistake."

"Don't I git no sale paper? How is folks goin' to know?" demanded Madison.

Hammond said that between gentlemen no bill of sale was needed, but that he would make one if the materials were available. Madison seated Hammond at the table in the dining room and set about collecting the writing materials, bringing first a thin pad of ruled paper, then a jar of muddy, brown ink, lastly a stubby goose-quill pen. Painfully the vendor scrawled the certification of the sale to M. Church of the "musty triumf," a slave for life, and affixed his enscrolled signature, of which he was proud. Mad stood at his shoulder scanning the words as they flowed laboriously from the quill and admiring the erudition which enabled Hammond to compose the document. He could at least read it.

Madison grabbed the paper before the signature was dry and waved it elatedly. "That make mine the bes' nigger in the worl', an' I got the bes' hoss too—Triumph an' Too Sweet."

Triumph stood mute in the living room, only vaguely aware of the transfer of his ownership. He knew something was happening to him but was indifferent. Madison embraced his shoulders with one arm and with the other thrust the paper before the black eyes. "You knowin' whut that be? That you! That a-makin' you mine," the new owner explained.

"Yas, suh, Masta," the slave muttered without enthusiasm. He understood that he had changed hands and that he had a new allegiance, but the white man's magic which identified him with a paper, a paper with him, baffled him. The whipping he had been promised for running away had not been discussed and he wondered whether it would still be forthcoming.

"Kin I feed it now, Mama? Kin I? Jest some pone an' 'lasses?" Madison demanded. "It hongry."

"Cain't you let it be? It kin wait till we-all have et our supper. Don't go a-makin' it sick first thing, a-stuffin' it," counseled the mother.

Mad searched his pockets and found three soiled lemon drops which he forced into his servant's mouth to appease his imagined starvation. Triumph had never tasted candy. He assumed it was medicine until it began to dissolve pleasantly on his tongue. He cast a faint and furtive smile toward his new master for this mark of his favor.

"Kin I wash it, Mamma? It all dirty." Madison ran his finger over the flesh of the boy's cheek and neck.

Mrs. Church sneered, "In all this pour-down? Want to give it the tisic? When it fairs up you kin make Luke clean it up."

"But I wantin' it clean now—to sleep alongside of," pouted Mad.

"You kin jest hol' your potato. Won't be more than a day or two. Let it be, I say. Set it down over there agin the wall with that other 'un of Mista Maxwell's. He know how to learn a servant, don't you, Mista Maxwell? He ain't always fussin' over 'em, a-feedin' an' a-washin' an' a-talkin' at 'em."

"Ain't no good coddlin' 'em," Hammond agreed. "A nigger, a nigger."

"If Paw don' die, an' I needs that money?" Mrs. Church speculated. "You reckons I kin sell it agin? Git my money?"

"Growin' ever' day. Makin' you a hunert a year, jest a-growin'; an' niggers goin' up," Hammond argued with conviction. But for the fear of the mustees' escape and his father's derision, he would not have parted with Trump at this time.

"No!" Mad interposed angrily. "You not sellin' it, not even if we starve. It mine, ain't you, Triumf?"

The boy responded only with an embarrassed nod. He was beginning to like his new master.

Supper time arrived and after the whites, including the barefooted Grandma, had eaten, Mad seated Meg and Triumph at the table and heaped their plates with food, ordering the sullen Emmaline to bring coffee and milk with which to wash it down. Triumph, who knew nothing of knife and fork, ate with his hands, save when Madison, hovering behind him, speared a morsel on a fork and plumped it into the surprised boy's mouth. Meg kept his eyes on the table and tried not to see the unseemly ministrations of the master to his slave. He was contemptuous of a white man who would so far demean himself.

It was still raining, and Madison called Luke to the gallery to make sure he had fed the horses, including Hammond's.

"Whut you goin' to do to that white boy chained to that buggy?" asked Luke. "Had ought to come out."

Hammond overheard the question from inside the house. He limped to the door and called, "Jest throw him somethin', pone or somethin', an' let him rest. Don' bother you none 'bout him. He cain't git loose."

"He cryin'," volunteered Luke. "Wantin' the other 'un."

"I cry him, an' I gits him home," threatened Hammond. "Do like I tells you, but feed him."

Mrs. Church's bed in the same room with Mad's she surrendered to the bridal pair, she sleeping on a trundle bed pulled out from beneath the four-poster of the idiot, around whom she had drawn the curtains while Blanche and Hammond passed through the room on their way to their own bed. She warned Madison to undress in the dark and only after Blanche was safely in bed. Meg was forced to sleep on the sitting room floor away from the door of his master's room. Triumph, against the will of Mad, who wanted him in

his bed, was sent to the kitchen to sleep with the yellow girl, with whom, young as he was, Mrs. Church thought she might be able to mate him. If not now, then soon. She had seen Emmaline looking at the boy and knew that she at least would need no prompting.

As Mrs. Church lay in her trundle bed, she wondered whether she might not have been wise, in buying a boy for Mad, to lay out a somewhat larger sum and buy the larger brother, about whom Mad and Hammond had talked at dinner but whom she had seen only as the carriage passed her door on the way to the barn. That would definitely save her the need of borrowing or renting a buck for the nubile Emmaline. Madison, however, had set his heart upon the smaller boy and it would now be impossible to alter his choice.

Madison was petulant and unreasonable, she knew. She had spoiled him, but had no regrets. If only she could continue to humor her only son and to provide whatever he required to make him happy! He was as large as Mr. Maxwell, as old or nearly as old, yet Hammond was a man and Mad was yet an infant. Mad had never liked his father, but if Wash Church had lived perhaps Mad would have grown up. She didn't blame the boy; in fact, she clung to his infancy and prolonged it.

Here was this Emmaline, raised in an assumption that she would serve for Mad, who proved to be as little interested in Emmaline as in Grandma. Mrs. Church had herself prompted the girl's overtures to Madison, as much because she believed that a boy of his age needed a woman as because she wanted progeny from the girl. But Madison scorned her. That horse and now this new slave were the only things about which he cared a whit. If only this Mr. Maxwell lived nearer at hand; Mad liked him and would listen to him, maybe would emulate him. Perhaps, when her father should die and she and Mad should come into his estate, Mad would mature, manifest judgment, act like a man. However, Madison's mother rationalized virtues for her son, as mother's will: he was not vicious, cruel, ungenerous, resentful, dissipated, not even unkind. She feared for his easy-going nature almost as much as for his infantility; perhaps they were allied.

She regretted the necessity to bed that newly married couple in the bedroom with Madison; but what else could she do? Their privacy could be but little violated by the boy in the opposite bed, who would sleep uncognizant of what took place across the room from him.

The door opened and Madison, in his underclothes, came out.

"Mad," his mother called, "whut ails you?"

"They a-doin' it, Mamma. They a-doin' it! I ain't a-goin' to stay in there," whispered the boy.

"Go back to your bed. Don' listen. Don't watch. They ain't hurtin' you."

"Makin' me sick to my stomick," he said.

"Well, then, put on your clothes. You ketch your death."

"I goin' to the kitchen in front of the fire with Triumf, after I pukes. Whut fer they has to ack that a-way?"

"They married," his mother extenuated. "Whut you 'speck?"

Madison stepped over Meg outside the door without waking him and made his way through the dining room, across the passage to the kitchen. His desire to vomit had ceased. Stretched on the floor was Emmaline alone. Triumph had disappeared. The embers in the fireplace lighted the room.

With his bare foot, Mad roused the girl. "Whure Triumf?" he demanded, frightened. "Whure it go? Whut fer you let it?"

The yellow girl opened her eyes and focused them hazily upon the young master, who found it necessary to repeat his questions.

"I 'on't know, 'm, Masta, suh," answered the girl, more interested in scratching herself than in the whereabouts of Triumph. "I ain't had him. I ain't done nothin'."

"It run. That whut. It run. It don' like me," mumbled the boy, beginning to weep.

"Ol' Miz put that white boy out here an' tell him to lay down with me an' keep warm, but he never. He go out that door. I wait, but he never come back," explained the girl.

Mad summoned his resolution and wiped the tears from his eyes. Barefooted, without waiting to dress, he started toward the barn. There was not a minute to lose. If the fugitive should stick to the road, Moonlight could overtake him. The rain had subsided and seemed to drip rather than to fall. Madison was oblivious of the weather. There was no alternative but to pursue the slave. He had probably gone in the direction of Briarfield, whence he had come. Mad was running by the time he reached the silent barn. He stumbled into the small harness room and lifted his saddle to his shoulder.

As he emerged, he saw Hammond's surrey, and vaguely in the murky dark he discerned two figures interlaced, in the back seat. One was Triumph, come to sleep with his brother. In his delight at finding his slave, Mad dropped his saddle. He climbed into the carriage, embraced the soundly sleeping boy and transferred the relaxed head from the brother's shoulders to his own. The flaccid form did not wake but nuzzled against its owner, unaware of the change of position. Mad, in his satisfaction at finding Triumph, fell asleep. So Luke found his master at daybreak when he arrived to feed the stock.

Mad sent Luke into the house to fetch his outer clothes that he might return and face his guests decently covered. His mother was up early and in the kitchen, urging Emmaline to hasten in the preparation of breakfast. Frying ham sizzled on the fire. Hammond appeared, dressed and impatient for an early departure, hoping to reach home by nightfall or soon thereafter. Only Blanche dawdled at her dressing, but she, too, soon appeared, complaining about the continuing drizzle through which she was reluctant to ride.

Mrs. Church urged the couple to remain until the weather cleared, but Madison, as much as he admired Hammond, resented his wife and was pleased at his friend's determination to depart. Besides getting rid of Blanche, he wished to be left alone in sole allegiance from Triumph, who should be freed

from any attachment either to his former owner or to his elder brother.

More from duty than from hope, Hammond invited his host to visit him at Falconhurst. As he stepped into the driver's seat of the carriage, he glanced behind to see Meg sitting primly and self-righteously as far from the chained Ace as it was possible to wedge himself into the corner away from him.

Mrs. Church retreated to the narrow gallery and removed the apron from her head as she waved farewell. Mad stood in the drizzling rain, his arm about Triumph's shoulder as if to restrain him from pursuit of the vehicle. Luke released the bridle by which he held the off mare. As the surrey passed into the main road, only Ace looked back and waved.

CHAPTER 25

"WHY you reckon they lives so pore?" Blanche asked Hammond. "She got money. Whyn't they build 'em a fine house? Trash!"

"Not trash, any sich. They eats good an' owns servants. You hear Miz Church say; she jist waitin' fer her papa," Hammond defended their hosts.

"They wouldn't know how to ack in a fine house like Crowfoot or Falconhurst."

"You ain't seen Falconhurst, your own sel'. Falconhurst ain't fine. Course it bigger, but not fine—ain't a fine thing there, 'ceptin' the niggers."

"But you goin' to put up a house, a fine house, brick or somethin'? Finer'n Crowfoot, with a pieanna 'nd things."

"Papa aims to; yes. Come next year or year after, an' we has a grandson fer him."

"You promise me," Blanche pouted. "You promised me right away."

"Cain't jes' shake a stick an' make a house. You got to buil' it, money an' all. When I talk about that new house, I not a-knowin'. You lucky, lucky to git a roof." Hammond had no brutal intent.

Beyond Fairfax, the sun peered tentatively through the fugitive clouds. The drizzle had stopped falling. The rain had worsened the roads and impeded the team, whose eagerness for home canceled their fatigue. By mid-afternoon the clouds had retreated to the western horizon and the sun came forthrightly out and the cleansed landscape glimmered through the steam that rose from it.

Few travelers were on the roads. The team overtook occasional pedestrians, mostly Negroes who paused to wave and stare, and met infrequent white horsemen, sometimes two riding together, who saluted gravely and commented upon the weather. Once they came upon a caravan of gypsies, encamped by the roadside, two vans, a cart, three women in faded clothes that had once been gaudy, busily cooking over an open fire, a half-dozen idle men, and as many naked children, waving and shouting inarticulately and running after the surrey. Tethered on both sides of the road were ewe-necked and spavined horses and mules and one gray mare conspicuous among them for her soundness and the excellence of her flesh. Hammond whipped up his team in passing the encampment to protect Blanche from the sight of unashamed brats.

Hammond calculated on reaching home by nightfall and postponed stopping to eat, but by four o'clock Blanche was insisting that she was hungry. She objected, however, to stopping at any of the scattered cabins they passed, and Hammond refused to stop at either of the larger plantations where it might have been possible to obtain meals, but whose owners he did not know. He drew up before a little hut on the edge of a clearing, above the door of which was an askew sign with the single word "Grocerys" in gray, which had perhaps once been black, upon an otherwise unpainted board.

Handing the reins to Blanche, Hammond got down from his seat and limped toward the entrance of the hut. He lifted the latch and went into the musty store. Boards between two hogsheads served for a counter, upon which rested slabs of fat pork and a quarter of a cheese. On a shelf were two bolts of calico, one blue, the other black. Barrels were scattered at random, and in the darkness of the room Hammond was able to see that everything was covered with a thin layer of dust.

Hammond waited and, when nobody appeared to serve him, he came out-of-doors, walked entirely around the building, which was the only one in sight. He hallooed to the forest, but when nobody answered he re-entered the store. He lifted the lids of the barrels and searched about. From a barrel partly filled with meal a mouse sprang out and startled him, and he saw that he had disturbed her nest of half-grown young. The only articles of food that required no cooking were the quarter cheese, and crackers, the last ten pounds at the bottom of a barrel. No knife was in sight, and so Hammond employed a mattock that leaned in one corner to hack off a piece of the cheese which was dried out and crumbled on the counter. Neither could he find bags or paper, in lieu of which he tore a piece from the bolt of black calico, laid it on top of a barrel and scooped the broken cheese upon it. To this he added crackers.

He estimated the value of the cheese, crackers and calico at thirty or forty cents, but to make sure of not cheating the merchant, whoever he might be, left a silver dollar on the board beside the cheese. He grasped the cloth by its four corners and carried it to the carriage. He closed the door as he went out and tried the latch to make sure it had caught.

"This all?" asked Blanche in her contempt of the meal.

"All I could find, 'ceptin' you wantin' some sow bacon an' no fire to cook it on. Wasn't nobody," her husband explained. "Keep us till'n we git us home. Not fur, now." He reached into the cloth spread on Blanche's knees and grasped a handful of crackers which he turned and extended to the boys in the rear seat. "Divide 'em up," he said.

Blanche munched at the crumbs of cheese and bit into a cracker. "It old and soft, webs on it," she complained.

"Don' eat it, an' you don' want. You say you hongry," said Hammond reaching for a piece of the cheese. He had no feeling of hunger. He resumed the reins and the team trotted forward. Blanche continued to pick at the food, but ate little of it. At length she pulled the corners of the cloth together and, sliding it into the middle of the seat, brushed her skirt with her hands.

Hammond picked up the parcel and handed it back to Meg. "Feed the other 'un, too," he ordered. "Ain't much, but Lucretia Borgia goin' to fix us when we gits there."

Sharing the food, Meg relaxed the aloofness he had maintained toward Ace and whispered, "Miz Lucretia Borgia, she my mammy. She the cook. She cook good. You goin' to see."

Ace did not interrupt his eating, but smiled and nodded. He found no fault with the cheese and failed to note the webs among the crackers. Not until the food was exhausted did he speak. "My mammy dead," he said. "I reckon my paw goin' to die too." Later he added with a sigh, "Trump done sol', an' I sol'. Masta goin' to hide me an' we gits there."

"An' I rubs on the stuff an' makes 'em holler. Masta always leaves me." Meg whispered his encouragement. "Me, I Masta's, his nigger. I house tamed. I feeds him, an' dresses him, an' stirs his toddy." He shielded his mouth with his hand as he talked and kept his eyes upon his master.

Ace had no reply to make. Except for the flogging which had been promised him, he had no concept of what was to befall him. His muscles flinched at the thought of the whip and he regretted his efforts to escape. Meg retreated to his corner of the seat, watched the landscape, and wove tales of his errantry which he planned to tell at home.

Only the horses' hoofs broke the monotonous silence. Blanche thought of the dresses she was going to buy. Hammond saw a planted field in which weeds were springing and wondered whether his gang was chopping cotton in his absence. He was unable to depend upon his father to force the Negroes to work. Had Lucy rubbed Mede every night with serpent oil, as she had been told? It was time Big Pearl was pregnant, if the buck was any good; Lucy, too, for that matter. Possibly Mede was sterile, like Pole, who was big and vital, but who failed to beget progeny. If Mede should prove sterile, what should he do for a buck, since his father was determined to keep the Mandingo strain pure? Lucy had had suckers by various bucks, and the influence of previous mates might taint the Mandingo blood of what she might produce by Mede; but Big Pearl's young would be unquestionably pure, since she had had no other mate—except himself. He had almost forgotten that Sunday afternoon when he had deflowered her. Could that, he wondered, attenuate the Mandingo blood of her child by Mede? His father had urged it and would have only himself to blame if Big Pearl's sucker (that is, if she had one) should betray a resemblance to his son. He smiled to imagine his father's added satisfaction if Big Pearl's baby should look like him; to the old man that would be better than a pure Mandingo, despite the notorious viciousness that resulted from the mixture of Mandingo blood with that of other races.

He had turned to Ellen, thinking of her sorrow at his marriage. How Blanche would accept the situation he did not know, but he intended, without flaunting the relationship, to continue it as a matter of course. Blanche would suspect it, but she should be grateful for its saving her from his lubricity.

White ladies naturally were repelled at physical intimacy, although Blanche had appeared complacent enough on the night of their wedding. Wenches were different; grateful for the honor of the white embrace, they reciprocated passion without shame or reserve.

Hammond felt the pressure of Blanche's hand upon his thigh. He looked

up from the road on which his eyes had focused in his reverie and heard his wife whisper, "That 'un, the white 'un, is a conjure. I knows it. He lookin' at me, at the back o' my neck. I feels it—like pins an' needles a-stickin' me all over. He conjure me. I skeared. You got to git shet en him—sell him or somethin'."

Hammond turned in the seat to look behind him. Ace was sprawled in the corner, head on side, feet crossed in his fetters, fast asleep. Meg was on his knees, facing backward, humming a song so low that his master could not catch its melody. "If Ace conjure you," the husband replied, "he doin' it in his sleep. Look back your own self."

"Then he playin' possum. I felt his conjure, felt it plain. He ain't asleep."

Hammond reached back and grasped Ace's knee, shaking him awake. The boy raised his head from his shoulder and opened his eyes, rattling his chain as he uncrossed his feet. "Wake up an' set up—straight. Meg, you turn aroun' an' behave yourself, an' stop that sing-song," the master commanded. "Don' you know you ridin' with your mist'ess?"

The urchins obeyed, Meg mumbling a "Yas, suh; suh, Masta, suh."

"Ain't no sich thing like conjure," Hammond told Blanche. "Jest nigger carryin'-on. They believes it."

"I believe it, too. Cain't tell me. That 'un, behind there, he a conjure. Doin' it in his sleep even. I knowed it when first I laid eyes on him. I wishin' you git ridden of him."

"I will—in two, three years, when he growed enough to git me a price."

"I reckon you don't believe ghostes neither?" When her husband failed to reply, she added, "Nor God, nor Jesus, or nothin'? I've seen 'em—ghostes, that is. An' Charles seen one oncet, a great big one."

Hammond did not interrupt her, and she added details of her apparitions and of her brother's. While she talked, he speculated upon the payment of his debt to Maddox, whether he should go into Benson tomorrow and send the money or whether he should permit interest to accumulate until Saturday. He abhorred debt and thought interest a waste of money.

The sun set clear, but there were clouds in the east that obscured the rising moon, but four days short of full. They traveled onward in the dark and the shadows. The horses recognized that they were approaching home and Hammond gave them their heads. Weary, they had traveled since breakfast without food; but it required a firm grip to restrain them as they turned into the lane that led to the house.

"Falconhurst," murmured Hammond reverently, as if he approached a shrine.

"This all?" demanded Blanche, as the surrey stopped and she looked at the house.

"This it!" declared Hammond.

A boy appeared from the shadows and a candle was lighted in the kitchen. A light also shone from Maxwell's bedroom.

"Git Vulcan to take care of these horses," Hammond told the boy. "They hongry."

Lucretia Borgia waddled onto the gallery. "Oh, suh, Masta, su'," she embraced Hammond with affection. "An' this the new miz? Ain't she purty?" and the other arm went about Blanche, who disengaged herself. "Ever sence your mamma die, I been wantin' 'nother purty white mist'ess, an' now I got me one," continued Lucretia Borgia.

Meg scampered from the carriage and threw his arms about his mother's wide thighs, claiming her attention. "Whure at your purty clothes?" she demanded. "Dirtied 'em, I reckons. Cain't keep yo'self clean."

"Masta sold 'em on a nigger," Meg sought to explain.

"We goin' to git more clo's," Hammond reassured the boy, placing one arm around his shoulder. "Meg been right good. He my boy permanent."

The elder Maxwell, attended by Memnon, the blue coverlid around his shoulders, appeared in the front door. "Ham," was all he said as his son went to kiss him. He brushed a tear from his eye.

"This Miz Blanche. This your daughter now, Papa. How you goin' to like her?" Hammond introduced his wife, a white figure in the dark.

The old man drew the girl toward him and kissed her forehead. "I goin' to like her an' you does, an' she like you. Welcome home, my dear, to Falconhurst. 'Tain't much, not fine haired like Crowfoot, but it right comfortin'. We goin' to be content."

"Whure at, you goin' to make the new house?" asked Blanche.

"Over on the knoll, I reckon," Hammond motioned, "—if we builds it."

"Come in, come in, an' be at home. I'd a stayed up an' I sure you comin' tonight," said the old man.

"Go in with Papa," Hammond told his wife. "I'll wait fer Vulc to take the mares."

As soon as the door was closed, he turned to Lucretia Borgia. "How Ellen?" he asked. "Whure she?"

"Ellen, pore thing, jest a-cryin' an' cryin', ever sence you go, suh. She sleepin' with me in the kitchen, suh. She not wantin' to come out."

Hammond's laugh was without conviction. "You don' reckon it make no difference with Ellen, me a-gettin' married?"

"No, suh, I reckon not," agreed Lucretia Borgia doubtfully.

"Tell Ellen not cry. She my wench, an' goin' to be—always. You tell her. Tell her I see her, come mornin'. She knew I got to marry, Papa wantin' a chil'."

"I know, Masta, suh. I tell her whut you says. Won't do no good, but I tell her."

Vulcan emerged from the darkness and greeted his master, whose return meant added work of which the Negro, in his welcome, took no account.

"Them mares ain't et sence mornin' an' they's tired. Feed 'em good, bran

an' oats both, an' bed 'em thick. They's tired," Hammond instructed the boy.

"Whut do with this white gen'leman, chained in back?" asked Vulcan.

"Ain't white. I almos' fergotten about him. Unlock him from the step. Here's the key. But leave his legs chained. He's a runner. Let Lucretia Borgia feed him an' sleep him. White vittles fer a little spell," he cautioned the woman, " 'cause he skinny."

"I feed him," said Lucretia Borgia. "An' leave the chains, Masta, suh?" she demanded with raised eyelids.

"He's a runner," Ham repeated. "An' supper? We ain't et. Kin you make us somethin', Lucretia Borgia?"

"Sure kin, Masta, suh, sure kin in jist a minute. Ain't no trouble—at all. Jist set down an' let this little nigger of yourn stir you a toddy while you waitin'. Ol' Masta goin' to crave one no way. He achin' again, bad. That Alph no good. He don' try to dreen his masta." Lucretia Borgia opened the front door for her young master and turned to cross the passage to the kitchen.

"Mede an' them all right? Niggers all well?" Hammond detained her.

"Reckon you goin' to barn Mede now. Big Pearl don' need him no more; Lucy neither."

"They's knocked?" asked Ham with satisfaction.

"Lucy say," Lucretia Borgia confirmed, but added, lest her own status be forgotten. "An' me, I feels like havin' me twins agin. Two of 'em. I feels jest like the other time."

"Cain't tell yet, I reckon," said Hammond and went into the house.

Hammond had hardly seated himself when Meg appeared with a tray of steaming toddies, three of them.

"Whut fer the other 'un?" the master demanded.

The boy looked up in his fear of having offended. "It fer Mist'ess, suh. That right?" he asked and sucked his lip.

"Ladies don' never drink corn. Don' you know that?"

"Corn? Inside the house?" demanded Blanche, amazed. "I'm temp'ance. Ain't goin' to be no corn whure I at."

"Medicine," explained the older man soothingly. "Jest medicine. My rheumatiz."

"In that case—" Blanche condoned.

"An' Hammond here, he tired. An' you are. Better swallow a toddy fer your headache, an' you got one. It vile, I knows; but it sovereign."

"I couldn't. It ain't right. Cain't stan' jest smellin' it," protested Blanche.

"Medicine," insisted Maxwell.

"My head does ache me awful, a-jouncin' in that surrey," said Blanche, reaching for the glass. She sniffed the drink, made a face, and tasted.

"Drink it down—hot as you kin stan'," the old man urged.

The girl took another sip. "I reckon it do ease my head," she conceded. "But it taste awful."

"Sure do," agreed the father, drinking.

Hammond described his trip to his father, told of the wedding, the health of the Major and Cousin Beatrix, the difficulty in obtaining a preacher, and Dick's officiation. He told of Charles' failure to return to his home, but said nothing of the Woodfords' absence on his own arrival nor of their threats not to permit the marriage. He was undecided whether it was necessary that his father should know of the unpleasantness, and postponed the narration of it at least until Blanche should be absent.

He recounted his experience with the young mustees.

When he reached their escape, the old man interposed, "I could a tol' you. Mustees? It's that human blood. Cain't trus' it at all. Never min'. Got to learn. Send him the money. Won't never ketch 'em. Once mustees gone, they gone."

"But I cornered 'em; Maddox did, that is."

"I swan! Did you fetch 'em along?"

"The bigger. I sold the little one fer as much as I give Maddox fer the both on 'em. Ourn don't stan' us nothin'."

The father brightened with pride in his son's astuteness. "Sound and strong?" he asked. "Mustees ain't got no bottom most generally."

"Big framed, but all bones. Needs feed. Reckon I goin' to have to hang him up—that runnin'."

"Take them chains offn his laigs, come mornin', and give him to one of our own to watch. Fat him up a little afore you flogs him. Leave him stew, a-dreadin' it. Mayhap he ain't goin' to need it. Hidin', seem like, don't cure a runner."

"I hates to hide 'em," Ham sighed.

"Reg'lar, natchel born nigger trader, Son," declared the father with approval.

"Whut I says," said Blanche. "An' on his weddin' too."

"Ain't nothin' wrong with tradin' occasional, an' you do it honorable. Don' want the name of it, but everybody trades an' he kin make him some money."

Memnon rang the supper bell and went to help his master, who rejected his aid. Maxwell rose from his chair and, only partly in need of their support, encircled the waists of Ham and Blanche as he propelled them toward the dining room. He took his place at the head of the table, but ate nothing, having eaten his supper before he went to bed.

Meg, in clean clothes that fitted him better than those he had worn on the journey, stood at his master's chair and heaped his plate with ham and fried eggs, begrudging Memnon the honor of pouring the coffee into which Meg hastened to pour molasses and cream. He concerned himself with Hammond only. Alph, despite that there were no flies, stood on the other side of the table and waved the peacock brush.

Memnon served his mistress, who sought to impress her father-in-law with a display of her elegance. She toyed daintily with her napkin, extended

her little finger, and was careful to rest her knife and fork, when not in use, on the bread beside her plate. Protesting that she was not hungry, she yet ate heartily.

Midway of the meal, Hammond sent Meg to summon Lucretia Borgia, who came and planted herself confidently just inside the door from the kitchen passage.

"Feed that new boy?" Hammond asked.

"He eatin', suh. Ain't no bottom to him. I fill him," Lucretia Borgia gave assurance.

"An' did you put skirt-frocks on them chilern, like I tol' you? Cain't have a lot of nekid niggers aroun' an' a lady here."

"Yas, suh, Masta, suh. On the boys, all on 'em, but I cain't keep 'em from kickin' up an' showin' theyselves."

"Whichever ones ain't modes', you switch 'em or spank 'em, little or big, an' tell the wenches to spank 'em, they own or anybody's." Ham decreed. "Got to learn 'em to keep they skirts down."

"Yas, suh, I goin' to learn 'em, an' you gives me leave. Afore now you always say let 'em be, not bother 'em."

"You spank 'em. An' the little wenches?"

"All but five or six little ones. I tells the wenches to keep the nekid ones shut up till I kin fix 'em. Reckoned no harm if Mist'ess goin' to see a little wench, but I gits 'em rig out tomorrer sure."

"No call fer 'em comin' round the house, noways. Keep 'em in the barn an' the quarters," ordered Ham.

"Better that—keepin' 'em from the house—than skirts. Clothes on niggers 'fore they is growed don't belong. They skins need air," opined the older man. "Blanche sensible. She goin' to git used to seein' 'em. Your mamma did."

Hammond discontinued the theme, leaving Lucretia Borgia uncertain whether to clothe or not to clothe the young blacks, to spank or not to spank them for their exposure. Instead, he asked her, "That Tense, you got her in an' ready?"

"Yas, suh, Masta, suh; Tense all washed, like you says, an' ready to wait on Miz Blanche."

The master suggested that the girl should come in and Lucretia Borgia went to get her.

"This the one I tellin' you Papa an' me pick out fer yourn, to wait on you an' do whut you wants her," Hammond explained to Blanche. "She goin' to be all yourn."

Lucretia Borgia returned, leading by her shoulder the light yellow girl, her head hanging in her diffidence. Her plain frock, reaching to her naked ankles, was clean and over it Lucretia Borgia had pinned a white fichu. Her small features were expressive. In fact, she was small all over, dainty, al-

most fragile. That fragility and her breasts, swelling into womanhood, only saved her from appearing boy-like.

Hammond extended his hand toward the girl in invitation. "Come on over here, Tense. Nobody not goin' to do nothin' to you."

The girl, unafraid of the master, stepped forward.

"No, other side the table," he said. "This your new mist'ess, like I tol' you about. Curtsy to her, nice-like. You goin' to be hern, and do fer her, goin' to do whut she say, ever'thing she tell you. Un'erstan'?"

Hortense went to the other side of the table, as directed, and dropped what was meant for a curtsy, but remained out of the range of her mistress' reach.

Hammond raised his eyes to his wife's face to see her pleasure in the present he had made her. "How you like her?" he asked.

"That?" demanded Blanche. "You 'speck me to put up with that? She your wench, that plain."

"Don't talk so. Not front of Papa." Hammond's face reddened as he spoke. "She ain't. I ain't touch her."

"Whut fer, then, she go to your side the table then. She ain't skeared of you, an' she is of me. Needn't tell me—I knows. A purty one like that, an' you ain't never touch her? I tell by the way she roll her eyes towards you."

Hammond pushed back his plate and shrugged. Meg looked at his mother and sucked his lip. He wanted to aid his accused master, accused of what, he failed to understand.

Lucretia Borgia took a step as if to retreat to the kitchen. Then, unable to leave her master in the lurch, she stepped forward toward Tense. "No'm, Miz Blanche, ma'am," she protested. "Tense pure yet." She stooped to raise the girl's skirt. "You kin feel fer your own self."

"No! No! Lucretia Borgia!" cried Hammond. "Miz Blanche is a lady; don' know nothin' about them kind of things."

"Well anyway, Tense a virgin. Masta ain't took her, ain't even look at her, yet," muttered the chastened Borgia. "Dido keepin' her pure fer him, time come he ready."

Hammond signaled with his head for Lucretia Borgia to retire. Maxwell cleared his throat, and rubbed one hand with the other to ease the pain, which had suddenly grown worse. Blanche's flushed face flooded with tears; she regretted that she had raised such a subject. Hammond folded his arms and pushed his chair back from the table, waited for his wife's weeping to stop.

At length her tears were exhausted and he spoke. "You doesn't like this one, you kin have any of 'em. Go through the cabins an' take your pick." (He made unspoken reservations of Ellen and Dite.) "This Tense, though, is the best we got—soun' an' spry, an' well raised an' pure—ain't never been touched. Has she, Papa?"

"I ain't knowin'," the old man shook his head. "Whut difference? Ladies ain't in'erested."

"This one good as any," Blanche resigned herself; but could not refrain

from adding spitefully, "I reckon you've had all of 'em."

Rising from the table, Hammond glanced at his father, intent upon the massage of his hands, and leered at his wife. "You didn't s'pose, I reckon, that I was no virgin?" he asked casually.

"One more toddy, jest one, afore we go up," suggested Maxwell, embarrassed by the quarrel. "Do you both good. You petered out, a-marryin' an' a-ridin', an' all. Let your boy stir 'em, Ham. He like to, an' he stir better ones than Mem."

Memnon, leading his owner from the dining room and seating him in his low chair, knew why Meg's toddies were preferred, and resolved to use more whiskey in the next ones he was called upon to make. The water was hot on the fire, and Meg concocted the drinks quickly and expertly. Blanche's headache had reasserted itself, and she drank her medicinal toddy with less reluctance than she had swallowed the first one.

The quarrel had subsided. Blanche wondered why she had raised it. There was only Hortense's delicacy and beauty to arouse her jealousy. She had no evidence for the charge she had made, but she knew that such a wench could never so long have escaped Dick's, Charles', and probably even her father's, favors at Crowfoot.

She drained her glass. Her headache had vanished but she felt slightly dizzy as Hammond rose to escort her to the room that had been his mother's. He steadied her elbow as they climbed the stairs. Lucretia Borgia had taken Blanche's bag to her room, had lighted the candles, and given final cautions to Tense, who waited, in trepidation lest she err, to serve her new mistress.

"Git yourself ready an' in bed," Hammond said. "I'll come back."

"Whure you a-goin'?" his wife asked in surprise.

"Down an' talk some more to Papa. Let you git off your clo's. I comin' back right away. Let Tense here do fer you."

Reaching the foot of the stairs, Hammond detoured through the kitchen, where he knew he would find Ellen. He trembled in anticipation of seeing her. Ace, with his fetters, was asleep before the fire; Meg was at the table eating the food that Hammond had left on his plate; Ellen was drying dishes for Lucretia Borgia.

Ellen looked up and saw her master in the doorway, spreading his arms to her. The plate she was wiping dropped from her hands and shattered on the brick floor, and Ace stirred in his sleep, as she glided ecstatically toward the inviting arms. Hammond embraced her and kissed her eager mouth.

Tears came into the girl's eyes, mingled fear and doubt and joy. She buried her face in his coat and shook with sobs. The boy held her close, saying nothing. At length he raised her head and kissed her tearful lids. A long while he held her in his arms, smiling down at her.

Meg went on intently eating his food, with an occasional furtive glance at the lovers. With this small servant or with his mother, the master had no reticences. Meg might have stared his fill without reproof. Ham trusted the

loyalty of both, knowing they believed him incapable of evil.

Minutes he stood, holding the girl without a word from either. At last he held her from him, looked into her eyes and said. "Tomorrer!" He surrendered her and was gone.

He felt himself refreshed, cleansed, triumphant as he returned to the sitting room, where his father was drinking a final toddy and urged the son to drink another. Hammond felt no need for one.

"That Miz Blanche, she techy like tonight. She tired. You not used to white ladies. Pay no 'tention when she key up," Maxwell advised his son, seeking to minimize the significance of Blanche's outbreak. "She a Hammond—high strung. She make a good wife, an' she gits used to—things."

"Yes. She goin' to be all right, I reckon."

"Course a Hammond proud."

Hammond grunted his agreement.

"You reckon you got that boy started so soon? That make a female squeamish-like."

The boy denied knowing. He smiled at his sire's impetuosity. He recognized the older man's tentative exploration for information.

Ham rose to go to bed, and the old man signaled to Memnon to help him to his feet. At the top of the stairs Meg waited to aid his master with his boots. Hammond gave the father the anticipated kiss and went into Blanche's room.

"Whut you been doin'? Whut keepin' you?" she complained.

"Jest Papa an' me a-talkin'."

"He say about me?"

"He reckon you real nice. Papa ain't hard on nobody."

"Then he ain't mad, whut I say at supper?"

"He say you petered out." Meg was kneeling, removing his master's boots and stockings. Hammond took off his coat and shirt, and sat down for Meg to strip off his trousers. He stood up in his underwear.

"Whure this wench goin' to sleep?" Blanche demanded.

"Let her spread out on the floor," the husband suggested; "here at the foot."

"Not here. Not right in the room," Blanche protested. "Put her out the door in the hall."

"But Meg; he always sleep in the hall, out my door. Cain't have 'em together." Hammond hesitated; then he added, "At the foot is good enough. We isn't go to do nothin' this evenin'. I tired. Wouldn't a-bothered you, comin' back, savin' whut Papa goin' to reckon."

CHAPTER 26

HAMMOND had been five days from home. Here was his heart—in these cabins and warehouses and barns, in the cotton fields and wood lots and pastures. He was out of his bed early, drew back the curtain and looked at his precious own earth before he opened the door and with his bare foot nudged Meg awake to help him put on his clothes. In boots and underwear, followed by his valet, he went down the hall to his own room where he had left the drab clothes that he wore on the plantation. The plum colored coat was to be reserved for occasions. He limped down the stairs and, without waiting to eat breakfast, went out the door and toward the cotton field. Little was changed in his absence. Small weeds were springing between the rows that were to be cotton, but in the distance was the gang of his slaves slowly wielding their chopping hoes. After breakfast, on Eclipse, he would go across to the gang to inspect its work. Early control of the weeds forestalled the need of chopping larger ones. The trouble was that the Negroes, Hammond believed through carelessness rather than deliberation, often chopped the cotton plants along with the weeds, caution them as he did. He did not credit them with the foresight that the more plants they destroyed the less cotton they would have to pick. The plants would require to be thinned in any event, but systematically and not by heedless chopping. He had made allowance this year for the seed that should rot and should fail to germinate, but it seemed all to have come up better than last year when it had been necessary to replant at intervals. Perhaps the white seeds of Petit Gulf variety that he had persuaded his father to substitute for the Tennessee cotton with its black seeds, previously grown on Falconhurst, sprouted with less loss.

He started back toward the house and outside the barn encountered two half grown scarecrows in skirt-frocks, which hampered their activity. Hammond had not considered how weird his bucks would look in such garments. He was amused but disgusted.

"Masta, suh, please suh, kin us chop?" supplicated the blacker boy. "They all won't 'low us!"

"You too little. Big niggers usin' all the hoes they is," explained the master. "You goin' to pick, come pickin' time. Mayhap you kin tote water by-an'-by. You play now."

"Us cain't play good, 'causen our clo's Miz 'Cretia Borgia put on us," pouted the black boy, sucking his lip.

The owner could see that the complaint was valid. Lucretia Borgia in her economy of cloth had had the wenches make the skirts too narrow. The boys might as well be encased in sacks. The material could be refashioned into breeches and shirts.

"Well, take 'em off then. But stay down here 'round the barn," cautioned the master. "You come toward the house nekid an' I has your legs switched.

Hear?"

"Yas, suh, Masta; we won't. We goin' to stay right here," said the black spokesman, getting quickly out of his garment. As an afterthought, he asked, "Kin we go to the ribber?"

"You all kin, an' you careful of snakes." A bath this weather would do the striplings no harm. He would like to join them. Perhaps he would swim when the day got warmer if he could find time.

Returning toward the house, Hammond detoured among the cabins. He saw Tiger, his yellow first begotten son, now four years old, and stooped down, extending his arms to the petted little slave. Tiger, usually so eager for his sire's attention, turned and ran from him, and, running, tripped on his narrow frock-skirt. Only his fall enabled Hammond to overtake him and gather him, screaming and kicking, into his arms. The master tore the clothes from the small yellow body and cast them aside as Sukey, the child's mother, appeared from her cabin, a younger and darker child on her hip.

"Oh, it you, suh. You got him, suh," she faltered, seeing that the boy was safe. "Don't take that skirt off'n Tiger, Masta, suh. Miz Lucretia Borgia say—"

"Frig Lucretia Borgia!" scoffed Ham. "Tiger my nigger or is he Lucretia Borgia's nigger? He goin' free." He snuggled his face against the not-too-clean belly and kissed it before he placed the boy on the ground to scurry to his mother and hide behind her skirt.

"They says you gone off an' got ma'ied, Masta, suh—to a white lady?" Sukey phrased the statement as a question, and waited for a reply. "Um, um!" she mumbled. "I wishes you joy; sure does wish you joy." The woman sighed. She still enjoyed the status of having once borne a child to her young master.

Hammond thanked her and passed on to Lucy's cabin to confirm what Lucretia Borgia had told him. Serpent oil assailed his nostrils before he reached the door. He found Mede luxuriating, naked on the bed, under Lucy's massage. Big Pearl stood behind her mother, holding the bottle of oil. As their owner opened the door he had heard Mede grumble, "Ain't you got no stren'th, woman? Now rub my shoulder hard. Hear? Hard. Twis' it." The tone was at once petulant and imperious.

"Lucy know how she goin' to rub you. Leave her do it," Hammond reprimanded the young Mandingo. "You ain't givin' orders. Git up."

"That Mede!" complained Big Pearl. "He always a-sayin'! Do this, do that. Reckon he done it all; don' give nobody else no part."

"No part of whut?" Hammond questioned.

"No part of makin' that sucker I got in me; Mammy say I got."

"Big Pearl, shut your mouth. Masta wantin' to know, he ast," scolded Lucy, jealous that her daughter should blurt the proud tidings that it was her own prerogative to tell. "Big Pearl knocked, Masta, suh; she shore knocked, an' me too."

"You sure?"

"Shore! Cain't fool ol' Lucy."

"That mean a new dress," Hammond promised.

"Red?" asked Big Pearl.

"Red an' you wants it. I reckon Mede here have somethin' to do with it, but it don' need to make him biggety," said Hammond, unable to disguise the satisfaction he still felt at the information that Lucretia Borgia had already given him. "He goin' to carry on, I put a ring on him an' barn him. Won't have him raisin' no hell, not with Lucy."

"Naw, suh, Masta, please, suh." the three slaves objected in chorus, the women as desirous to retain their man as he was to stay in their cabin.

"I be good, Masta, suh," Mede promised.

"He be good," echoed Lucy. Big Pearl regretted her complaint.

"We see," said the master turning to the nude boy, now arisen from the bed and standing in anticipation of inspection. Hammond ran his hand over the brown belly, wiped the serpent oil from his hand on the coverlid, and refrained from further manual exploration. "Fat in the guts, a little. Don' want no fat guts," he warned.

"He jes' et," Lucy offered as excuse.

"Twist—side to side," instructed the master. "That way. Now ben' down. Keep twistin' an' bendin'. You, Lucy, see he do; an' rub his guts—hard, knead 'em. 'Member, you ain't no jest jackass nigger; you fightin' nigger. Now, hard them guts up."

Hammond suspected the boy of having broken training in his absence and of gourmandizing. "How your bowels? Open? Ever' day?"

"Mos' ever' day, suh, yas suh." Mede qualified his answer with a turn of his head.

"Ol' Mista Wilson say to watch you; you costive. Tell Lucretia Borgia I say castor oil you good; big dose, right this mornin'. But wear your pants when you goes to git it. All plugged up, whut makin' you cantankerous an' hard to han'le."

"Plug up. Dat all matter—like a peevish sucker," Lucy agreed, with a maternal impulse.

"I barn him with the other bucks an' you say, Lucy. Any time," the master reiterated his threat.

The boy knew that, left to Lucy, he would remain in the cabin; but he resolved to mend his ways—to avoid repetition of the castor oil as much as to retain the women. And he would get back into his training; his master would see to that.

"A red dress, you says?" Hammond reminded himself. "Yourn red too, Lucy? We ain't got no red on hand, but I'll git it in Benson next time I goes. Dido will help you sew it. I right proud of them suckers you two got. Ol' Masta, he goin' to be proud too. Means a dollar, a whole silver dollar, each one, an' you has 'em alive."

"Masta didn't say about givin' me no present," said Mede invidiously after Hammond had left the cabin. "Had ought to have new pants—sompin'."

"He givin' you cas'or oil," Big Pearl giggled, springing into the air with both feet and clapping her hands.

"Nev' min'," Lucy sought to soothe the boy's feelings. "I give you half o' my dollar, Little Boy—when I gits it."

Hammond was late for breakfast. He found his father and his wife, toddies in hand, waiting in the sitting room.

"Whut this?" he asked, looking at Blanche's drink. "I thought you temp'ance."

"I is; but my head ache me, and your papa reckon—"

"It all right. Right weak, an' her head hurtin'. Medicine." Maxwell tried to quiet his son's displeasure.

Hammond watched askance as his wife lifted the goblet to her mouth, sipped from it tentatively and lowered it. What kind of woman had he married? Hardly a lady!

"Ever'thin' all right, did you find it?" the father asked.

"I reckon," said Hammond without conviction. "The Mandingo kickin' up, talkin' back at Lucy, an' not a-workin' hisself."

"Hide him. Touch him up," prescribed Maxwell.

"Mede? I castor oilin' him. That bad enough." Hammond withheld the pregnancies of the wenches as too indelicate for his wife's hearing.

"Son, don't be makin' too much o' that young Mandingo buck. He big an' vig'ous; yes. But he ain't God. He yourn; you isn't hisn. He need a little snakin', pour it on. See whut that larrupin' done to Memnon; make him a new buck. You got to learn about niggers. They apes. On'y thing they feared of is the snake."

"Mede ain't a-needin' no dose of snake, Papa. Ruin his pride. Jes' about kill Mede."

"That buck your pet. That whut he is, your pet. Let him run over you an' you wants," said the old man, swallowing the last of his toddy and peering into the bottom of the goblet to see whether a trace might remain. He could well have drunk another, but refrained from ordering it, lest Blanche incur her husband's ire by taking another along with him.

"Mede!" Blanche pounced on the name, repeating it *sotto voce,* as if in fear that it would escape from her memory. "This here Mede, who he?" she demanded aloud.

"Why, it is Ham's fightin' buck, Mandingo," blurted Maxwell. "Ain't Ham tell you? He won't talk about nothin' else; an' he tote that black boy aroun', wrapped in waddin'." The other man was innocently unaware of saying aught amiss.

"Fightin' buck? I tol' you you couldn't have no fightin' buck.' I tol' you I not wed you an' you got one!" Blanche flared.

Hammond's smile was short of a sneer. "Whut you wants I should do

with him? Boil him fer soap grease?"

"You kin sell him, I reckon."

"But I reckon I ain't a-goin'."

"I got sompin' to say!"

" 'Bout Tense, you has. 'Bout the rest, you ain't. I got to run this plantation. You'd be havin' me plantin' daisies, 'stead o' cotton."

"Ham jest a-keepin' him fer showin' off. Don' never fight him," concluded Maxwell.

"I goin' to. I goin' to, an' anybody got one to fight agin." Hammond rejected conciliation. He intended to brook no female interference with the plantation economy. His father's dictates, couched as suggestions and grounded in experience, Hammond heeded—or at least considered. Even them, he overrode upon occasion.

"Masta, suh, kin I ring the bell now, please suh?" Memnon asked, at a halt in the talk. He believed that the masters would starve if his clapper should break.

" 'Bout time," said Maxwell, grateful for the interruption. He tried to rise without waiting for his slave, and Hammond crossed the room to aid him.

"I tearin' them skirts off'n them saplin's," Ham said. "They too skimp-like. Tiger fallin' down in hisn."

"Whut I say! Skins need air," affirmed the older man.

"Time back, you say put 'em on," Hammond reminded. "Ain't no call for 'em comin' around the house, anyways—the young 'uns."

"But—But I cain't see 'em, cain't watch 'em grow."

"You kin lean on Mem, on your spry days, down to the barn an' through the cabins. Do you good, weather like we havin'," Hammond placated his father's peevishness. "I wants you should see Tiger, how big he gittin'."

"Still feedin' him white?"

"Course, an' Sukey too."

"You an' niggers!" Blanche sighed, seating herself at the table. "Don' you talk about nothin' else?"

"Niggers an' cotton. Whut else is they?" her husband demanded in surprise. "We got 'em; we got to look after 'em."

"My papa don'—"

"He bust!" Hammond interrupted her sentence.

The girl was trapped. This serious, stern, satisfied, unromantic youth, whom she hardly knew, was her husband. He was an escape from spinsterhood, which even at sixteen had terrorized her. The house was plain, drab, gloomy, not even as good as Crowfoot—not what she had pictured. No affluence was apparent to her. The older man she conceded to be kind, but a mere echo of the boy. She resolved to salvage what she should be able.

"Them dresses?" she proposed. "When we goin' to git 'em?"

"We git 'em," Hammond promised again. "Cain't go today. Maybe tomor-

rer, next day; Sat'day sure. Dressmaker in Benson, ain't they, Papa?"

"Dresses?" asked Maxwell.

"My papa never bought me none—that money not comin'," Blanche explained.

"Mind me to git some red goods fer Big Pearl and Lucy. I tol' 'em I would," said Ham.

"They—?" the old man checked his question, looked at his son, who nodded his head. "Mandingos," he said with satisfaction.

Slaves again. The conversation always turned to Negroes.

When they rose from the table, Maxwell stumbled and submitted to Mem's leading him back to the sitting room. Blanche hesitated a moment and followed. Hammond tarried. Blanche saw him place his hand on Meg's shoulder.

"You tell Miz Ellen," Hammond in a low tone instructed the boy, "to wash good and wait upstairs. Tell her I come. Un'erstan'?"

The boy nodded gravely.

"Don' you fergit. You fergit, I goin' to blister your bottom."

"You wants me too, Masta, suh?"

"Yas, I goin' to need you takin' off my boots. You kin come."

"Memnon goin' to have to stir they toddies fer Ol' Masta an' Mist'ess while I up there."

"Yo' mist'ess not cravin' no more toddies," decreed the master. Meg did not comprehend the sternness with which he bit his words.

As Ham entered the sitting room, Blanche demanded suspiciously, "Whut you tell that nigger?"

"Jes' makin' him behave," he evaded, picking up his hat and his symbolic whip. He bestowed a perfunctory kiss upon his father and another with but little more ardor upon his wife.

"He workin' all the time?" asked Blanche, crossing to the window and watching her husband, bound she knew not whither.

"Jest about," said the father. "Somebody got to drive, an' I cain't no more. Course, Ham doin' more than he called to. Some of it jest showin' off, showin' he better than me runnin' the place. A weed in the cotton or a pimple on a nigger most drive him loony."

Instead of ordering his horse, Hammond limped to the stable and saddled Eclipse with his own hands. The stallion, without exercise in his owner's absence, was fractious and this gave the boy a fillip of added pleasure in the bringing under obedience of the beast between his legs. He cantered down the lane and half a mile into the open road for no purpose except to work the spirits off his mount. When he returned and made his way toward the hoe-gang in the cotton field, the horse was sweating and chastened. He guided Eclipse carefully between the rows in the soft soil so that the horse would not tread upon the plants.

He watched the Negoes chopping slowly, regularly, and methodically while he crossed the field. As he approached them, he heard their voices but

not their words, but at his arrival they fell silent. That was the only concession to his presence. He sat astride his horse and watched the work, which was going well enough. There was no driver, and no overseer except himself. Occasionally one of the workers usurped the authority to criticize or give orders to the others, but was seldom heeded.

The gang of some fifty or sixty adolescent and well-grown young males was so large that there was no occasion for haste lest the weeds should take the field before the slaves could cover it. The master did not urge them to hurry; rather he enjoined care not to uproot the cotton by chopping too close to it. He walked Eclipse through the gang and around it, drawing rein for a word of comment or caution or advice more to break the monotony of watching without working than for any import of what he said.

Once he dismounted and, giving the horse to a young mulatto to hold, took the boy's hoe and set to work. In the quarter of an hour that he chopped away, he destroyed three times as many weeds as any slave, but found himself destroying cotton also. He cursed his own awkwardness to the amusement of the hands in whose laugher at his ineptitude he joined.

"Don' chop no more, Masta, suh," begged one big boy. " 'Tain't nice, white man choppin'. Whut fer you got us 'uns, goin' to chop you'self?"

It was no blond dignity but an aching back that caused him to desist. With the boy who held the horse, he exchanged his hoe for the bridle, and called to him a very black and utterly naked stripling who carried a pail of water to quench the thirst of the workers. He rinsed his mouth and spat the water upon the ground, after which he drank long and heartily, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. Last, he dipped a gourdful of water, and let it trickle through the hollow handle of the dipper over the shoulders and body of the boy, to the child's delight and the amusement of the gang who straightened their shoulders and leaned upon their hoes to marvel at and applaud their master's playfulness and the urchin's antics.

Hammond bethought him of Ace, whom he had forgotten. He rode over to where Vulcan was at work and called the sweating boy to the horse's side. "Whut you do with that key?" he asked.

"Right here it be, Masta, suh, in my pants. I ain't lose it!"

"Come noonin'," the owner directed, "you git to the kitchen an' take them spancels offn that boy. After you et, fetch him out here an' hoe him awhile—not hard, mind, not hard, till come time we gits some meat on his frame."

Vulcan only half understood what was expected of him, but he nodded his comprehension.

"An' watch him that he ain't goin' to run. He a runner, an' you an' me got to whup him, again he got anything to whup. You lets him git loose, I goin' to whup you 'stead o' him."

The slave had never been punished, nor even threatened before. He was taken aback, hurt, injured, insulted. The only reply he could make to such a threat was to cringe or to laugh. Vulcan laughed, guffawed for all to hear,

laughed louder and longer than the joke warranted—if it was a joke. He looked at the master's face and by the wry smile he found there knew that he had turned the threat into a joke, even if none had been intended.

"You ain't a-goin' to do that, Masta, suh," he said in intervals of laughter. "With them marks on my back, I wouldn't bring nothin', wouldn't bring nothin', wouldn't bring nothin', an' you go to sell me comin' fall."

"Paddle don' leave no scars," countered Ham.

"I keep that white boy. He ain't goin' to run from me," Vulc promised.

"An' feed him good. Fat him up."

"Yas, suh. Watch him an' fat him."

"Named Ace, 'gain I go'n' to change it."

"Ace," Vulcan confirmed, as the master rode away. The slave returned to his hoeing, aware of the enhancement of the esteem of his fellows from his intimate conference with their owner. He was glad he had been able to laugh and that the others had heard. What might be their envy when they saw him in charge of Ace, working him, ordering him about, threatening him! It was almost like having a slave of his own. He would feed him and fatten him, and then flog him. The master had said that he might help him whip the runner.

Vulcan questioned, if this trust the master placed in him should keep up, whether he should relish being sold. He knew he was to be a part of the next draft, following cotton picking, and had looked forward to the excursion to the great city he had heard about, the city of white men in fine clothes, the city of glamour and excitement, of exotic sights and sounds and smells. Vulcan was undecided whether he should choose to go into the great world of the unknown or to remain at Falconhurst and serve as his master's surrogate. He knew, of course, that the choice would not be his.

Hammond rode once more around the scattered gang of workers and then guided Eclipse toward the barn. Without unsaddling him, he turned the horse into his box stall. Then he limped toward the house, entered the kitchen, and made his way toward the stairs. Meg sat on the top step, elbows on his knees and cheeks in hands, waiting. Hammond's fingers on his lips enjoined the boy to silence.

From the sitting room, Maxwell heard the halting step on the creaking stairs, made a surmise, but said nothing to his daughter-in-law who sat across the room from him. He harked in his thoughts back to the time when his own needs had been insatiable.

Hammond stopped at the foot of the stairs to open and slam the front door before he entered the sitting room. While he embraced his wife, his father disposed of his tobacco in anticipation of the casual kiss he knew his son would give him. Meg brought three toddies, and Blanche raised her eyes to her spouse for his disapproval before she lifted one of them from the tray. He offered no protest.

"They choppin' right good-like—slow, but ain't no hurry 'boutn them

ol' weeds," Hammond told his father. "That Petit Gulf come thick; didn't rot none like that Tennessee."

"Littler boles," the old man objected.

"But more of 'em, an' they busts wider."

"Mayhap," nodded Maxwell who had little interest in growing cotton.

"They don' need no watchin'," Ham reverted to the choppers. "We kin git to Benson tomorrow, sen' this money fer that Ace an' stop that in'erest whut eatin' us up."

"An' git my dresses?" Blanche interposed.

"Might as well," her husband agreed.

"I ain't seen yo' mustee," Maxwell complained. "Plagued to have me?"

"Vulcan have the key to him. Cain't pull his britches off till Vulcan come at noonin'. He thin-like, but good bones, you goin' to say."

Blanche shivered. "He a conjure. That boy a conjure. I feel him, when he lookin' at me, right on back o' my neck."

"Don' talk nigger talk," her husband scoffed. "They ain't no conjure."

"An' there be (niggers sure they be), it don' touch white folks," Maxwell sought at once to salvage the girl's belief and allay her fears. "I don' want no conjurin' should start up aroun' here an' stir the people."

Memnon's bell summoned the family in to dinner.

CHAPTER 27

THE kinds and patterns of cloth available in Benson were limited, as was the imagination of the poverty-soured little dressmaker, whose presumedly affluent father had at his death some two decades earlier transpired a bankrupt. Miss Forsythe was more concerned with her excuses for her necessity of earning her meager livelihood by means of her needle than she was with sewing itself. Though reduced in her circumstances, Miss Forsythe insisted upon being thought a lady. She produced a single copy of *The Lady's Book* from the summer of the previous year, over which Blanche pored in the choice of designs for the three dresses, to which Hammond had limited her, with the promise to bring her from New Orleans in the fall a fine costume and a cloak.

But the purchase of the material and the choice of design were not all. Blanche was joyfully forced to return again and again to Benson to buy linings and buttons, furbelows and findings for the dresses and to consult the little dressmaker and submit to her fittings. For Blanche it was a carnival of pleasant anxiety and anticipations. Twice a week, Hammond was forced to adjourn his work on the plantation and drive his wife to town, which he did without complaint. The leisurely hoeing of weeds in the cotton went on in his absence almost as well as when he was at home. In fact, when Lucretia Borgia could steal the time from her other duties to go to the field for an hour or so, the choppers worked faster for the deputy than they ever did for the master. He was frequently surprised to find the amount of work that had been done while he was away.

On Saturday afternoons he left Blanche at Miss Forsythe's cottage while he went to Pearl's tavern to watch the fights and to meet his friends. He had stopped taking Mede along, not because of Blanche's presence but because of its futility. No other owners would match their boys against Mede, and the runty, unsound striplings that served as stakes for the betting were such as the Maxwells would not waste food upon. In buying Mede, Hammond had overshot his mark.

However, everybody talked about Mede, inquired about his health and his training, suggested matches for him, but always with the slave of another owner. Hammond refrained from boasting about the boy, but mention of Mede gave a fill'ys to his owner's ego; and Pearl and Redfied, especially Redfield, were always dragging Mede into the talk at the bar. The pride of ownership sufficed for Hammond.

"I'm a-breedin' him right now. Ain't fitten hardly to fight," Hammond would explain. "The dreen on him pullin' him down."

On the way home, Hammond listened inattentively to his wife's enthusiastic account of her visit with Miss Forsythe and her prognostications of how beautiful the frocks were to be. They were her sole interest. Miss Forsythe's

descent to economic Avernus, Blanche would now, married to Hammond, never have to undergo. She imagined a parallel between Miss Forsythe's father and her own and she had escaped the debacle. Indeed, the pity she expressed for the dressmaker's poverty was in fact a satisfaction that she would never come to it. She trembled at the thought of it.

Between her excursions to the dressmaker's there was nothing for Blanche to do. Within the house, everything was done for her, and there was nothing out-of-doors to interest her. Besides, she feared the effects of the sun on her face, the whiteness of which she was at some pains to conserve. Afraid at first of the elder Maxwell, she grew to like him. He was generous, candid, and uncritical. She was a white woman, a Hammond, his son's wife. He asked no more. Her headaches grew more frequent and more severe. Her father-in-law was indifferent to the number of toddies she drank, even urged them upon her. Hammond did not disapprove the remedy, but neither did he know how much of it she consumed. He was out of the house much of the time, supervising the chopping of the cotton, seeing to the welfare of his livestock, giving orders and advice in the cabins, training his Mandingo.

His wife and his father exchanged gossip. She described her dresses to him again and again and told him of Miss Forsythe's plight. He had known old man Forsythe and contributed his version of that gentleman's decline and fall. For all of Miss Forsythe's reprobation of indecorum in other women, for which she was known, Maxwell told Blanche of her strife to sustain herself until the failure of her beauty, of which she had not had much at any time, forced her to turn to her needle. Blanche relished this tale the more each time she listened to it; for her it threw glamour around the little dressmaker.

Maxwell reminisced, talked of his wife, of her being a Hammond, recounted his son's childhood and the accident that had crippled him. After the fifth telling, Blanche ceased to attend to what he said, but for want of company she sat with him, wafted a worn palmetto fan, and sipped her toddy.

She had even less interest in the conversations between her husband and his father about the crops and the weeds and swine and slaves than in the older man's garrulity about the past. It seemed to her that Hammond was obsessed with the plantation. Every time he entered the house, it was to report the details of whatever project was in hand, the carelessness of some workingman, the cold or cut hand or stubbed toe of some slave child. These minutiae of his stewardship interested his wife not at all, and, except as they were reflections of his son's activities, interested the father but little more. He expressed his approval of all Hammond did. It was right because Hammond had done it. The son's judgment was as good as the father's, was the father's in fact, since Hammond followed a routine in his husbandry that the father had learned from his experience and the son had watched in practice since he was old enough to limp at his father's heels and ape his manners. The concern of the older man was only that his young Negroes should feed heartily and grow apace. Cotton was only to

keep them moderately busy. He had never built a gin or a press of his own, but had hauled his crop to Benson for processing. It seemed to him that it might be better to devote the entire acreage to corn which the Negroes could eat than to cotton for sale; he preferred to sell the produce of the plantation on the hoof. But if it amused Hammond to grow cotton, his father had no will to interfere with the plan.

Blanche was bored and even nauseated by her father-in-law's eternal praise of his son, present or absent. If only Hammond would do something amiss, if only he would err, if his father would upbraid him or express in the son's absence some disapproval of his actions. The only fault the older man could find was that the son worked too hard, and in his voicing of it that fault became a virtue.

"An' you don' quit this a-strivin' and a-drivin' an' a-frettin', you goin' to bust down with rheumatiz afore that boy is big enough to take a hold," he warned.

"Whut boy?" demanded Ham.

"Why, your boy—the one Blanche is goin' to have you."

Blanche blushed.

It was a reminder to Hammond. He had neglected his marital duties, which were not entirely pleasant, what with the pallor of the soft white flesh, which he was not forced to see but of which he imagined the color under the heavy nightgown. Its very smell, though less heavy, was more offensive than Negro musk. The tang of fresh musk, if attenuated, was zestful, but this blond effluvium connoted corruption.

Blanche knew about Ellen. Hortense, with no evil motive, had let the cat out of the bag and had answered her mistress' further questions with an innocent candor that was not intended as a betrayal. Tense had grown up to believe that the slave was at the master's disposal, and was aware of nothing amiss in Hammond's relationship with Ellen except that it forestalled her own elevation to his favor, to which she had been taught to aspire. Hortense was able to tell but little, from which the mistress surmised much. Blanche quizzed the elder Maxwell as subtly as she was able but his answers were evasive.

"Mayhap," he admitted, "I don' know," and he didn't. "Ham right considerin' that way, aimin' to spare a white lady."

Blanche had no desire to be spared, although she dared not say so. Carnality was presumed to be repulsive to the chaste wife, and she submitted to her husband's embraces without enjoyment; with resignation, if not under protest. She was sensible of the protection that the Negro concubine offered the wife.

"No 'um, Mist'ess, I ain't know nuffin', not nuffiin'; no 'um," was all Blanche could draw out of Lucretia Borgia, who planted her feet wide apart in her determination not to betray her young master.

When Blanche turned to Meg, who had overheard his mother's denial of her knowledge, the boy only hung his head, rolled his eyes, and muttered it

was hard to tell what. A lie to a white was an offense, but, in this, he recognized that the truth would be a greater one.

For once, Lucretia Borgia came to her son's aid, not for his sake, however, but for her master's. "He 'on't know nuffin', Mist'ess, ma'am. How you 'speck he know nuffin'? That nigger don' even know whut you astin' him; 'on't know whut you talkin' about. Ain't no good pumpin' him."

Meg's comprehension was somewhat vague, but he and Alph had speculated and argued about what their master and Ellen did. Meg was mixed in his resentment of Ellen's intrusion into his master's affection and his loyalty to the man who owned him. He failed to realize the anatomical barrier to his primacy with his master.

Blanche, for all her seeking, was unable to accumulate the evidence she wanted. She was baffled. Her husband's philandering with his wenches she would not have resented, but his dalliance with a single wench aroused her ire. She compared Ellen's beauty with her own, to the slave's disparagement; and what perversity of taste could prefer black to white? To the white woman there was no gradation—black or white. Nor could she credit that it was no preference, a mere concession to a white frigidity, which she could not admit that she did not feel. Her mother, with the modesty befitting a daughter of a Hammond, had warned her with circumlocutions that a man's fidelity was not a lady's lot and that she should have to submit to a husband's attentions or neglect with such equanimity as she should be able to muster. But that the neglect should come so soon!

Blanche could not, for several reasons, present her grievance forthrightly to her husband, charge him with dalliance with the wench. She had no direct evidence; the most she knew was what Tense had said innocently and inadvertently. He would admit a venial guilt, but pretend it was for her own protection. And how would she find words for the indictment, which was a subject too delicate for a lady's speech? A lady not only possessed no passions but took no cognizance of them in men and menials. Blanche was a lady; look at the color of her skin.

Moreover and worst of all, the charge would beget recriminations. Hammond, on their marriage night, had found her not to be a virgin, a matter she had tried to forget and knew, although it was no longer discussed, that her husband had not forgotten. To chide him would but arouse his memory of her own guilt. She did not dare.

While Hammond did not overtly flaunt his relations with Ellen, he was at little pains to conceal them. Sooner or later Blanche would know. It was to be surmised, taken for granted. Didn't every man, every planter, have a favorite wench or two? Oh, there were some, he knew, who pretended to a kind of chastity, but he doubted its long endurance. Of course there were men, old and impotent men, whose abstentions were enforced. His father, not chronologically aged, certainly was incapacitated for lechery by his rheumatism; but Hammond did not doubt his father's earlier relish of black embraces.

There was no reason to doubt, since there was no denial. Ham's attachment for his slave was the natural, normal, usual thing. Why should he dissemble?

The one consolation Blanche had was in her pretty dresses. About them, Hammond had kept his word. And there would be more of them, a never-ending supply. When Hammond on a Saturday evening had brought the three frocks home, Blanche could eat no supper nor permit Tense to eat. One after another, with Tense's help, she laced herself into them and swept down the stairs to show them off to the Maxwell men, whose admiration was perfunctory and without enthusiasm. Their satisfaction was not in the dresses themselves but in the pleasure the girl took in having them. They did not know that a factor in that pleasure was the allure the dresses were counted upon to have for the husband. She should be irresistible. She contrasted herself in her finery with Ellen in her osnabergs. She would show that black hussy who was the more beautiful.

On going to bed that night, she knew that the clothes had triumphed, when Hammond sent Tense to the kitchen to sleep that he might be alone with his wife. It was not in fact the triumph of the clothes, but of Blanche's delight in them, her charm and gaiety and animation that had won him.

Thereafter, Blanche wore her new dresses constantly, changed them three times a day merely to sit opposite her father-in-law and sip her toddies. Her joy in them soon subsided, however, especially as she went nowhere to show them off and nobody came to Falconhurst. Besides, they were tight. More and more, she kept to her room, where she could relax her stays, dressing only to go downstairs to her meals.

But she missed her gossip with Maxwell, and her toddies. As the weather got warmer, the dresses became even more uncomfortable and Blanche had Dido make her some Mother Hubbards of blue calico, mere envelopes for her figure, which if they had been white might have served for nightgowns. Hammond did not entirely approve of her wearing such a garb downstairs in his father's presence, but Blanche pointed out that she wore underclothes with these Mother Hubbards, and shoes and stockings. She was fully clothed and yet comfortable. There was nothing for him to cavil at. He still did not like them, didn't want his wife dressing like a wench. Somebody might come. In such an event, Blanche said, she would go to her room and dress before the visitors should see her.

As the summer wore on, the girl dispensed with more and more of her undergarments, leaving off one thing one day, another the next. Despite the warmth of the days, she still drank her toddies hot for her persistent headaches and relied upon the breeze of her palmetto fan to keep her cool. One day she appeared downstairs without her shoes, complained that the heat had caused her feet to swell. Hammond contemplated her unshod feet, but in view of the reason for them withheld his censure. The following day her feet were entirely bare. They were not beautiful. They were indeed puffed and swollen, the pallid skin stretched taut. The balls were broad with incipient

bunions, the toes bent from cramping into shoes too short. The excessive length of the great toes was aggravated by long, rough nails with dirt embedded beneath them.

Blanche, standing barefooted in a single garment, her stringy yellow hair uncombed, her cheeks blotched red with heat and eyes bleary from whiskey, bore little resemblance to the girl girded in the challis dress whom Hammond had accompanied to church a few months before. But she was white; he had married her.

More and more frequently he used the summer heat as an excuse to absent himself from his wife's bedroom. In his own separate bed he was not constrained to wear his underclothes, and alone, Blanche would be free to unbutton the neck of her nightgown.

On one such night late in June, Ellen lay in her master's bed. It was too hot for dalliance, too hot even for sleep and they lay apart, the girl on her elbow waving a palmetto fan over the supine body of the boy.

"That enough," Hammond argued. "I right cool now. Lay out an' git some sleep. Don' need you should fan me like I goin' to melt. I ain't grease, or somethin'."

The girl merely stooped to kiss his naked shoulder and continued her fanning. "You hot, and you know I like to."

"Ain't no call to," he said, stretching luxuriously and raising his arms to cradle his head in his hands the better to take advantage of the breeze from the fan. "Mind me of the time I was a little saplin'; my mamma had Lucretia Borgia settin' by my bed a-fannin' me to sleep warmish evenin's, sometimes the whole night," he reminisced. "Lucretia Borgia let me sleep nekid, like I is now, though my mamma reckon I wear a shirt."

"You had Lucretia Borgia a long time?"

" 'Fore I was borned; 'fore my papa marry my mamma. Don' know whure Papa got her at; mayhap he bred her right here at Falconhurst. She gittin' ol', mayhap thirty-five. Still breed good though—she knocked again. Beginnin' to round out too, I noticin' this mornin'."

"She says I am," the girl announced.

"You is whut?"

"Knocked."

Hammond sat upright. "When? When Lucretia Borgia say?"

"Yesterday." Ellen was casual. "I don't know nothing about it. She says I missed my time of month."

"Don't mean nothin'. Nigger talk. Lay back," Hammond ordered, and he ran his hand appraisingly over the girl's abdomen. "Breastes hurtin' you? Notice anything?"

"They itch-like, an' ache a little, not much. They growin' some, I reckon."

"Mayhap Lucretia Borgia know. She right knowin' about such."

"You mad?" asked Ellen contritely.

"Mad?"

"Mad at me? I couldn't help it; you did it."

Hammond snickered. He ran his arm beneath Ellen's body, drew her to him and kissed her mouth. "That how riled I is," he declared. "I a-wantin' it."

"But you won't be a-wantin' me," the girl began to weep. "Be givin' me to one of the hands—not a black one though, not to a black one!"

It was too dark in the room for Ellen to see the smile that spread over Ham's face. "Ellen, honey, I ain't givin' you away. You mine, mine. You an' me, we goin' to have a lot o' suckers, a whole gang of 'em, one mos' ever' year."

"Sukey an' the others?"

"They different. They jest handy-like. I ain't payin' Ol' Man Wilson no fifteen hundred dollars jest for three, four months of you. No, suh. You got my sucker in you, I wouldn't take fifteen thousand fer you."

"You reckon I am—?"

"You missin' your time, and your breastes, Lucretia Borgia mayhap right. Leastwise, she goin' to be, an' she ain't. Us carryin' on like we is, not a-goin' to be long."

"You reckon it's a little buck?"

"I reckon. I gits bucks. All of mine been bucks so fur. Not a wench so fur, nor a crip."

"You reckon Miz Blanche's goin' to be a buck, I mean a boy child?"

"Ifn ever she have one. I ain't been doin' right by her—too hot in all that riggin'. I'm a-goin' to."

"Lucretia Borgia says Miz Blanche—She pukin' up every mornin' and her feet swellin' up; Lucretia Borgia reckons that a sign."

"Lucretia Borgia reckons too much. She knowin' ever'thing afore it goin' to happen. Got to stop her messin' in whut ain't her put in."

"I reckon you don't crave Miss Blanche have none?" Ellen's inflection turned her speculation into a question.

Hammond was quick to deny that such was the case. "Course I wantin' one, an' Papa do. Course I do. On'y Lucretia Borgia, she got to let it be. Whut an' if Blanche puke up? Whut an' if her feet—? Whut an' if she belly out, which she ain't yet? Lucretia Borgia got no call to." The weather had made the young man irascible. Ellen accepted his peevish mood, glad that Lucretia Borgia and not she herself was the target of his vexation. She fell silent, but continued to wield the fan above his naked body long after he had turned his back on her and had fallen asleep. There was no moon and the room was so dark that she could distinguish only a vague outline of the man at whose body she gazed down in adoration. At the sudden contraction of a muscle in his stiffened leg, Ham stirred in his slumber and Ellen brushed his shoulder with her hand to quiet him.

As regarded herself, Ellen hoped that Lucretia Borgia was not mistaken, since Hammond was not averse to her bearing a child. Would it arrive before

the child carried by her mistress? It should, she calculated; her master had favored her for months before he had married Miss Blanche. A surge of jealous hatred of the wife swept over the wench, a guilty passion beyond her control. She knew that she herself was the intruder, the interloper. Did her master come to her from preference or merely to relieve his wife from the obligation to submit to him? Why should the white woman not relish the male embrace? Wherein was the difference between white and black? She thought of herself as black, and was glad of her skin; she would not exchange the ecstasy she obtained from her master's caresses for the chaste frigidity of wifehood. She hated Blanche, she believed, more because of that frigidity than because of its occasional absence. What did a man want with a woman who only tolerated him?

It would go hard, Ellen knew, but she believed that she would be willing to forego Hammond's embraces if he were able to obtain as much satisfaction in Blanche's bed. The nights Hammond spent with Blanche, Ellen threshed in her bed and wept tears of agony, but she didn't question the wife's right to him, even more her duty to receive him. Jealousy she admitted to herself, but never hatred. Now she hated. Now she willed Blanche injury, illness, abortion, death. To murder her would alienate her white lover and defeat her purpose. If she could poison her secretly! There could be no rivalry—the other was white. Murder was the only solution.

Ellen was terrified at the concept that Hammond might surmise her fantasies. How soundly did he sleep? If he should wake now would he divine what she had been thinking? The more she tried to stifle her evil thoughts, the more they obtruded into her consciousness. She was unable to sleep, and when Hammond awoke in the faint light of the false dawn, he felt the breeze even before he turned to see the girl, still reclining on her elbow and still patiently and monotonously swinging the fan to render his slumbers comfortable.

He chided her for her failure to rest, but was not unaware of the devotion that had impelled the vigil. The woman accepted his reproof as praise and so it was.

CHAPTER 28

BLANCHE sat with the elder Maxwell, rocking and fanning herself with one hand as she sipped a toddy with the other, when Hammond came down to breakfast. The two were always together and it was impossible for father and son to converse alone. This seldom made any difference to them, since they had little to discuss in confidence. Today Hammond was bursting with news that was only for his father's ears. Again at noon, when Hammond returned from the cotton field, he found his wife with his father. He tarried after dinner in the futile hope that Blanche would retire.

Hammond, in the late afternoon, swam in the river to refresh himself from the swelter of the day's heat. Afterwards he returned to the cotton and rode among the hoe-hands, whom he found to be as exhausted as he himself had been before his swim, and he dismissed them while the sun was high in the sky. It was his impatience to return to the house more than any consideration for his Negroes that prompted the stoppage of work before sundown.

But yet again his wife was with his father. He sank into his chair, but wanted no toddy. Maxwell drained the one he was drinking and called to Memnon to lead him out-of-doors. Hammond followed and waited for his father and the slave to emerge from the privy.

"Go on," he told the Negro. "Nev' min'. I'll lead him back."

He waited till the slave was beyond earshot and blurted his confidence. "Blanche knocked!" he said.

The father betrayed no emotion, but asked, "She say?"

"Ellen say." At his father's look of amazement at the source of his information, the son elucidated, "Ellen say that Lucretia Borgia say. Blanche pukin' up."

"I reckoned Blanche never say. A Hammond lady, modest-like. Like your mamma; I never knowed you a-comin' along till two months before, an' then she plagued to tell. Her a-bulgin' out, only way I had of knowin'."

"Ellen too," Ham added.

"Ellen what?"

"Ellen knocked. She reckons she is."

"She be then. Niggers knows, an' they free to tell it." Maxwell paused in the crooked path, and laughed aloud. "Two of 'em! Two of 'em! You potent as that Mandingo. I proud of you, Son; right proud of you."

The son was proud of his prowess also. He made a conscious effort to control his limp as the father resumed his ambulation toward the house.

"Coursen," the elder modified his pride, "you got to take care. Don' want you should overdo. Two is enough fer one summer."

"Do I look like I goin' into gallopin' tisic?" Hammond looked down at his vigorous body for answer to his rhetorical question. "Besides you forgettin' Dite," he added.

"That las' winter. I seein' her las' week, a-roundin' out. When she come fresh, about?"

"August, September, I s'posin', about."

"Lucky, ain't it, Blanche an' Ellen comin' the same time."

Hammond waited silently for elucidation.

"We kin put Ellen's sucker on to Big Pearl or some of 'em, an' she kin suck Blanche's boy," Maxwell continued. "Always good havin' a wench with fresh milk ready fer a child."

The son's "No" was emphatic. He paused in the path. "Ellen have a chil', she goin' to have it. Goin' to keep an' suck it her own sel'. Even an' Blanche got to suck her own, Ellen goin' to—"

"There! There!" the old man mollified his son. "Some wench goin' to have milk. No white lady goin' to spoil her bosom suckin' her chil'; you know that. They'll be another 'un."

"Not Ellen! She needin' hern fer her own."

"Right choice of that wench, ain't you, Ham?" There was no remonstrance in the father's inflection. "I reckon her chil' bein' yourn makin' the difference. It all right. I ain't a-sayin'—."

As they approached the house, the two fell silent, and when they entered they saw Blanche retreating from the window through which they knew she had watched them. A degree of embarrassment hovered over the trio.

Unable to contain her curiosity, Blanche at length demanded, "Whut you-all talkin'? Somethin'!"

"I tellin' Papa we got to make this fall's coffle—time to begin primin' 'em," Hammond answered blandly.

"That right. We got to be pickin' 'em out an' a-readyin' 'em."

Blanche failed to sense from Maxwell's pouncing upon the subject that it had not been the theme of the outdoor colloquy. "I'm a-goin'! I'm a-goin', ain't I? I never bin to New Orleans. I'm a-goin'!" she declared with an enthusiasm tempered by doubt.

The older man waited for his son to make answer. If she was pregnant now, it would be so apparent by fall as to forestall her going upon such a trip, which was in any event patently impracticable.

"Niggers," protested Hammond in shocked surprise. "A coffle of niggers! A-sleepin' outdoors an' a-eatin' whure we kin git it. No place fer no white lady."

"But New Orleans," pouted his wife. "I ain't ever bin—New Orleans or nowheres."

"Later, come spring, mayhap we go—jes' you an' me together. Not in fall. I fetchin' you back a fine cloak with me when I come—somepun fine, velvet or silk or somepun."

The promise modified the girl's disappointment.

"Besides," interposed Maxwell, "Hammond ain't goin' to New Orleans this year. That new law there, 'bout not a-sellin' niggers brought in. He jest

goin' to the Fork-of-the-Roads by Natchez."

"Laws! They lunatic. Nobody payin' no mind to them French laws. A body's niggers, his; he kin sell 'em to whoever wants 'em." Hammond did not choose to be bilked of his excursion to the larger and gayer city.

"Cain't tell yet if they goin' to 'force that new law in Louisianie. Goin' myself, I wouldn't pay no mind, but I don't want you should git in no ruckus."

"Got to pay a cent on the dollar in Mississippi fer carryin' 'em in an' sellin'," protested Hammond.

"Well, ruther pay it, ain't much, than law them Frenchies in New Orleans. Gen'lemen wantin' hands, they comes up-river an' carries 'em home; Natchez jest as good."

"Bucks think they goin' to New Orleans."

"Come to the Fork-of-the-Roads, tell 'em it New Orleans. They ain't a-goin' to know," Maxwell laughed. "Anyway, they there. Whut they goin' to do?"

"That Cane buck beggin' to go, beggin' I should take him."

"Whut buck that? I don't know no Cane we got."

"You know Cane. That Hurricane, whut you bought at that Judge Morton break-up. He wantin'—"

"You tell him no? Ain't much more than a saplin'; two year's growin' in him yet. Whure he hear about goin'?"

Hammond shrugged. "Vulc's shootin' off, I reckon. Vulc know he on the list a'ready."

"Vulcan, yes. He ripe, grown about. Whut fer all these boys wantin' to be sold off? Reckon we not feedin' 'em good enough? Falconhurst good enough fer any nigger—seem like."

"They hearin' talk 'bout New Orleans, how fine it is."

"They ain't hearin' 'bout the cane fields. I ain't never held sellin' 'em over they heads. Don' believe in it. Ain't no, 'An' if you don' do this or don' do that, I sells you down the river,' like some owners. I never threats 'em; I jest sells 'em when they ripe and I ready. Lets 'em hear about the sugar fields an' they gits there."

"Leastwise, they wants to git sold, most of 'em. Mayhap, an' if we work 'em more—if they got more to do, they more content," Hammond suggested.

"Let 'em be," the older man counseled. "Ifn they wants sellin' they easier to han'le on the road a-takin' 'em to market."

"I don' have no trouble. They goes along peaceable," declared the son.

"Trouble like to be with the wenches, partin' 'em from they young," the father foresaw.

"We not sellin' off the wenches?"

"Three or four or five, if they kin be got ready. Sell 'em before they stops breedin', while they still brings a price."

"Ourn ain't ol', any of 'em."

"Don' let 'em git ol'. Black Jewel an Susie an' Jasamine, fer ninstance,

must be comin' along to thirty, thirty-five. We got the best out of 'em. Anyways they thinks after they give a body eight or ten suckers, they owns the plantation."

"You a-sayin'. They yourn," Hammond relinquished his objections.

"Not mine more than yourn, but I not wantin' you to pull up with a passel of old, played out servants 'at nobody a-wantin'. Keep 'em fresh. Young ones are easier to han'le."

Blanche, who had remained quiet during the colloquy, interposed, "My papa never sell no niggers. He don' reckon it right, breakin' 'em up. We got some ol' and blin'—"

"He got to feed 'em, ain't he?" Hammond cut her off short. Major Woodford's practice of retaining slaves to superannuation convinced Hammond of the wisdom of his father's argument for selling them before they began to fail. His father-in-law's ineptitude was such, his failure in all departments of his procedures. The Maxwell way might at times be wrong, but the Woodford way was never right. "First day you feelin' like, we pick 'em out an' write 'em down," he told his father. "I'll start in a-primin' 'em."

"An' I wantin' to see Doc Redfield. Ask him to ride by when you seein' him in Benson," said the father.

"None of 'em sick?" demanded Ham, surprised.

Maxwell laughed. "I wantin' to know kin I count on Doc to ride with you with that coffle to Natchez. No hurry about seein' him."

"Don' need nobody. Niggers all biddable an' I ain't no chil'."

"Biddable here. Better Doc should ride along, ifn he kin leave his Widder that time. Better have somebody, some white man," the older man argued blandly. "You an' Redfield all right? Ain't got nothin' agin' him?"

"We gits along, but—"

"You in charge, of course," specified Maxwell. "All on your shoulders." He knew Ham's jealousy of his age and responsibilities. The boy yielded gracefully enough to his father's authority, but resented the interposition of any other between them.

"Well," Hammond accepted the terms.

CHAPTER 29

THE following Saturday at the tavern Hammond saw the veterinarian and gave him the message. "He wantin' you to ride with me to New Orleans—mayhap jest to Natchez—with a coffle. Doesn't trust a boy. Thinkin' I a saplin'."

"Your papa know better 'an New Orleans this time. Vomit ragin'. I wouldn't risk to go, an' wouldn't let him sen' you. I'll ride by," promised Redfield.

"I not goin' till after pickin'. Vomit stop by then."

"Course. That different. Coursen I'll go. Anything to accommodate you or your papa, either one," Redfield agreed. "Besides I gits away from the Widder."

"Time a plenty. Jest ride by when you passin' that way."

Redfield nodded, but he had something more important to discuss. "Ain't talked to Pearl, have ye?" he asked, looking surreptitiously about him. He grasped Ham's elbow and led him out to the entrance porch beneath the wooden awning.

Hammond permitted himself to be guided, eager for the secret.

"Don' say nothin', but Pearl got a letter. He goin' to show it you. Sportin' gen'lemen from the City comin', bringin' with 'em they big fightin' buck, want to pit it agin' yourn. You goin' to have a chance to pit your boy again' a regular New Orleans fighter," Redfield confided.

"How news about me a-havin' Mede git all the way to New Orleans?" Hammond pondered.

"Jest wanted you to know. Don' let on you anxious when Pearl tellin' you. Take it casual an' if you wantin' a good match."

Lewis Gasaway, unaware that the conversation was confidential, interrupted it with an invitation to drink, which was accepted. So long as buying of whiskey continued, Pearl Remnick did not intrude. He joined the party in a single drink, retreated to the opposite end of the bar to serve some customers, and, when he returned, spread open before Hammond without comment the letter of which Redfield had apprised him. Redfield had previously seen the letter, and Gasaway read it over Ham's shoulder.

"Friend Mr. Remnick," the epistle ran; "It comes to me a rich gentleman Mr. Maxwell has a fine fighter near to Benson. I got one to match against him. I take my fighter to Benson in a short time to match him. You tell the gentleman please have his Negro redy when I come. Mine is real large and strong like a bull. I go to Natchez. Then come to Benson. Your humble and obdt servt. J. Neri." The letter was from New Orleans, undated. It was neatly written in an easily legible running hand, except for the signature which was so formalized and embellished that it was impossible to be sure of more than the "J" in it.

Hammond read the letter three times, turned it over and looked at the blank reverse, then on Pearl's next trip to the end of the counter shoved the letter toward him. "Who this whutever his name be? This J. Neri?" he asked.

"Never seen the fuggin' Frenchy, not as I know. Callin' me his god damn friend. I don't know him," Pearl said, folding the letter and placing it in his pocket.

"Heared of me, about my Mede," speculated Hammond.

"From folks passin' through, likely. Lots of fuggin' talk a-goin'," Pearl guessed.

"Goin' to fight him?" Gasaway demanded. "You bin a-cravin' a chance."

"'Pendin' on his buck and on whut he offerin' to bet," shrugged Hammond. "I ain't fightin' my buck fer no scrawny runt of a saplin'." His seeming indifference to the proposed match was all Redfield could wish.

"Course I ain't knowin', but I reckons that Frenchy cravin' to fight fer money—not jest fer niggers. Likely, comin' all that way, ain't carryin' along no bettin' bucks." Pearl appeared to know more than he admitted about the business of the unknown letter writer.

For all Hammond's assumed indifference, his eagerness to reach home to intensify the Mandingo's training detracted from his interest in the afternoon's entertainment. Before the final fight he departed, first having sought out Doc Redfield again and reminded him of his promise to come to Falconhurst. He was more concerned about the veterinarian's appraisal of Mede's fitness to fight than about his consultation with his father upon the subject of the journey to New Orleans—or perhaps only to Natchez.

So anxious was he to step up Mede's conditioning, he galloped Eclipse all the way and went to the Mandingo cabin before reporting his arrival to his wife and father.

"I goin' to pit you," he told Mede excitedly. "Gen'leman from New Orleans bringin' one, big as a bull."

"I ready for him. I beat him for you, Masta," Mede declared complacently.

"You ain't either ready. You got to git trainin' good—runnin', liftin' that ol' log, Lucy oilin' an' workin' you, special your guts."

Lucy acquiesced with a "Yas, suh, Masta. I rubs Mede ever' day, me an' Big Pearl."

"An' sleep alone on that bed. Reckon you kin, or has I got to barn you?"

"I won't let him, an' you says, Masta, suh, me or Big Pearl, either one. Don't take him away, suh, please, suh," Lucy implored.

Hammond nodded his acceptance of the woman's promise, which he knew she would keep.

"You still drinkin' down them eggs from Lucretia Borgia ever' day?" Ham demanded.

"She makin' me. I don' like 'em, Masta, suh."

"Nev' min'; you drink 'em down. An' you shittin' good?"

"Yes, suh, Masta, suh."

"Any time you doesn't, you tells me. Now git out there a-liftin' that log. Put it up an' down over you head till you petered out. Hear? Tomorrow we goin' to run you, young buck on your back; an' then we swims you in ol' Tombigbee. I go to tucker you till you ain't a-cravin' no wenches."

Mede's training had been steady and consistent; Hammond had seen to it, even in those weeks that it had seemed to him that he should be unable to find an opponent against whom to match him. Now, with the prospect of a fight impending, the owner was appalled with the thought that he might have neglected the slave's conditioning, might have permitted him to loaf and stagnate into flabbiness. He was resolved to make up in a week's intensity of effort all that the boy had lost, or had failed to gain, in the interval since he had fought.

City sportsmen did not bet their money upon mere untrained cotton hands; their fighting slaves were superior animals, pampered and fed and primed into the very razor-edge of condition. Ham felt a temerity in exposing his country reared Negro to conflict with such a one. His nervousness verged on panic. Flattered that Mede's reputation had penetrated as far away as New Orleans, Ham surmised that the city man who proposed to beard him in the tavern would possess a demon of a kind not to be found in rural parts. He, the owner, would be the butt of the tavern if he should decline to fight; and, anyway, it was as well to fight and lose as to permit the massive Mandingo to stagnate in desuetude.

Blanche, drinking a toddy, made a wry mouth of indifference to Ham's tale of the letter. Maxwell's chuckle assuaged his son's doubt. "You got him to fight with, didn't you? You got to crack eggs, an' you makin' a puddin'," he said. "Nev' mind a bust jaw or a gouged eye. You got him to fight, not to look at."

If Mede should lose, Hammond would suffer no recriminations at home.

Redfield lost no time in his visit to Falconhurst. As he approached the plantation astride his dun horse, he encountered Hammond on Eclipse following Mede, who trotted ploddingly, Belshazzar perched triumphantly on his shoulders. Despite that it was Sunday morning when no work was required of the Falconhurst slaves, the Mandingo had been lifting, jumping, stretching, contorting, and now running, under his master's relentless eye, for five hours. His scanty clothes were wet and his face shone with sweat, but fatigue, if he felt it, was not visible. It was Hammond's intention to tire the fighter to the point of exhaustion.

"Whut you meanin'?" asked the veterinarian jocosely. "Stinkin' up the country with nigger sweat?"

"I honin' him, honin' him right down."

The doctor shook his head in doubt. "Go 'long," he said. "I jest goin' to see your papa, see whut he wantin' of me. Proceed whut you doin'."

To have complied with Redfield's dispensation would have violated Maxwell hospitality; and Hammond turned Eclipse, beckoned to Mede, and joined

his guest. Mede jogged along well behind the horses.

When the white men had dismounted, Redfield glanced toward the Mandingo, and observed him as he came up the lane, watched him lift Belshazzar easily down from his shoulders. With a curiosity that appeared idle, he walked toward the big Negro, felt of his biceps, his thighs, and his shoulders through the sweat soaked garments, raised the boy's shirt to feel his abdominal muscles, making no comment.

"How he seem?" inquired Hammond anxiously. "I jest beginnin' workin' him; don' know kin I git him ready, come Sat'day. That Frenchy had ought to given me more time."

Redfield stooped to pick up a bit of soil with which to cleanse his hands of the Negro sweat. "Th' boy all right, I reckon; good. On'y I wouldn't work him no more, was I you. He hard now as you kin make him an' he runs limber-like. You goin' to wear him down. Let him rest till you ready to fight him."

"He a lazy son-of-a-bitch," scoffed the owner, concealing his pride. "I 'on't want him goin' off on me."

"Might swim him some, an' keep him rubbed," prescribed the veterinarian. "Eats, I reckon."

"Eats good, white vittles an' eggs raw, 'bout a dozen ever' day."

Redfield nodded wisely in professional approval, and the gentlemen entered the house.

A half-empty toddy glass stood on the table. Blanche, seeing the visitor through the window, had retired to dress in more fitting garments.

"Reckon my son tellin' you whut I want—'bout that Natchez ride," Maxwell opened the subject.

"I tell him I'd go along. Glad to, glad to 'commodate."

"Course, nothin' to do. Hammond here, he do ever'thing. He in charge," the father made clear, not to deprive the young man of his sense of responsibility.

"Better," Redfield agreed.

"I make it right with you; Hammond will, that is."

Redfield raised his hand in protest of payment. "Only neighborly," he said. "Not a dollar, not a cent. You pay my keep on the road. A chancet to git out from under the Widder fer a spell."

"Course, course," Hammond promised, ignoring the aspersion on Redfield's wife. "But—"

"How many? How big the coffle?"

"Dozen or fourteen head, bucks that is; mayhap fifteen or sixteen. Ain't decided yet," Maxwell explained.

"Papa aimin' to send along three or four wenches too."

Redfield evinced surprise. "I reckon you wouldn't sell off wenches."

"Ol'," explained Maxwell. "Ridden of 'em afore they stops breedin'—that is if we kin git 'em showin' in foal in time."

"Bring more open," Redfield argued.

"Young yallers, mayhap, yes," Maxwell admitted. "These'n ol', thirty or sich, an' mos'ly right dark."

"Papa wantin' to," Hammond implied his reluctance to part with the women.

"Trouble about the Widder," Redfield complained. "Ain't sold off. First thing you know, they stops breedin' on you an' ain't worth nothin'. May take along two or three my own self, the Widder willin'."

"You welcome, welcome!" declared Hammond. "Gotten anyways to take the surrey fer the wenches—'specially are they knocked. Room for two or three more."

"An' I a freeholder now—that farm of the Widder's. I kin sign your 'tificates you got to have in Louisianie and Mississippi that you ain't a-bringin' in runners or bad niggers."

"Banker Meyer always signs ourn," Hammond asserted.

"The Banker don't know nothin' about the niggers—never seen 'em. But he signs," the father chuckled. "He know Warren Maxwell ain't sluffin' off bad stock."

"Takes two, two property owners. 'James J. Redfield' will look nice right alongside of Banker Meyer on them papers. An' I know your hands. My name will mean somethin'."

Blanche had dressed carefully, Tense lacing her into her brown costume. Mincing and demure, she sidled into the room.

"You ain't a-knowin' Miz Maxwell yet, are you?" Hammond rose from his chair. "This her, this my wife. Doc Redfield, you hearin' about," he made the introduction.

Blanche simpered and curtsied, and the Doctor made an elaborate bow. "Hammond here, he bin a-tellin' me," the girl said.

"An' me, he tellin' me 'bout his beautiful wife," Redfield lied. "But I never guessed."

Blanche blushed at the flattery. "Right warm," she said, reaching for a palmetto.

"I knowed your mamma, she about your age. Hankered fer her, but course I didn't have nothin', that time. Your grandpa wouldn't hear to the likes of me, an' I known better than ast. Miz Hammond her name was then, an' purty as ever you see, but dark; not fair like you—dark."

"Mamma gittin' deef now," Blanche sighed.

"So did your grandpa, ol' Orestes. You remember Orestes, Mista Maxwell."

"Like yest'day. Brother of Theophilus, but no sech a gen'leman."

"My ol' man worked there—Pleasant Hill, the plantation was called—overseer, when I was a boy. Mista Orestes was kind and generous, sober; mean when he drunk. I mind he made my pappy lick me oncet fer somethin' I never done, somethin' about a wench he keepin' fer one of his boys." The doctor

realized that the conversation, the monologue, was getting upon thin ice.

Maxwell saved his daughter-in-law's ear. "I wasn't a-knowin' you worked fer the Hammonds."

"My pappy! They had hosses, good hosses, and niggers, and pigs an' things; that's whure I learned to doctor so good. The Hill onhealthy; somethin' always sick—ager, worms, summer complaint, even the pox, oncet the vomit. Worst was the nine days sickness—carried new suckers right off, never saved a one, might as well knock 'em in the head oncet they gits it."

"I ain't never had it here," Maxwell vaunted.

"You right clean. Don't never let it start. Belly button swells up an' turns green-like, ain't nothin' to do."

Meg appeared with four toddies on his tray, served his senior master first, as he had been taught. Blanche lifted her hand, but just in time caught Hammond's eye, saw the just perceptible shake of his head, and dropped her hand to her lap.

"I temp'ance. I never drinks corn," she denied.

" 'Ceptin' sometimes fer medicine, suffers awful when her head aches her," modified her father-in-law for the sake of truth.

"Course, course," assented the guest.

"It fer gen'lemen. I ain't opposin' that Mista Maxwell and Hammond goin' to drink it, even right in the house, but as fer me—" Blanche resigned herself and fanned vigorously.

"Whut become of your big nigger—usin' this little one?" Redfield asked.

"He slothin' aroun' somewhures. This here one spry; Hammond tryin' to tame it fer the house. Twin of my rheumatiz boy."

"I know. Your cook's."

"An' Memnon's; he their sire," said Hammond.

"That boy helpin' you? Any good, that dreenin' off?" the doctor asked professionally.

Maxwell nodded. "Wouldn't be without him. I'm better. See?" He opened and closed his hand vigorously. "Mayhap the warm weather too."

"The buck gittin' it?"

"A little at first. But I keepin' him well toddied, soakin' him in it."

"Course, I ain't no doctor, no white doctor, I knows that. I jest a horse an' nigger doctor, but I was a-tellin' Ol' Jim Smithers about it; over Ten Mile way. Ol' Jim has got it, the rheumatiz, jest like yourn. He tryin' it. He ain't got no little buck, but he dreenin' hisn into an ol' wench. Jest as good, don't you reckon?"

"Jest as good," Maxwell admitted, rising to go in to dinner, which Mem's bell had announced.

Blanche displayed her best manners, manners which her husband knew she possessed, having seen them at Crowfoot before he had married her. He was none the less proud that she had not forgotten them—the crooked small fingers, the dainty forkfuls, the abstemious appetite, which were reserved for

the presence of guests. Hammond saw Redfield watching the girl with approval and admiration, which Hammond shared. She acquitted herself with elegance, and her husband was proud.

After dinner and another toddy, when Redfield was about to depart, Maxwell followed him to the sunny gallery. "You reckon she knocked up?" he asked the medical man, glancing behind him to indicate to whom the question pertained. "She puke mornin's. Lucretia Borgia reckon."

"Bin two months, 'most three, ain't it?" Redfield calculated. "Knowin' Hammond, she is, or she ain't a-goin' to never be. She is like to have a dozen, runnin', one a year. I reckon she be."

Redfield's prognosis was not definite. He did not commit himself, but the encouragement he gave Maxwell prompted that gentleman, after his guest had cantered up the lane, to return to the sitting room to sip another toddy, in which his daughter-in-law, having loosened her tight bodice, joined him.

Hammond accepted the veterinarian's counsel to ease up on the Mandingo's training. He worked him only lightly, swam him daily in the river, saw to it that he was oiled and massaged, questioned him about his bowels. Mede had an easy week.

In view of Pearl's opinion that the New Orleans man might demand a money wager, Hammond dug up the pot of gold and extracted from it twenty-five double eagles, which was the maximum sum he was willing to hazard. He was concerned less about winning money than about winning the fight and proving his slave's prowess, but he felt that five hundred dollars was all that he could afford to lose. He preferred to bet Negroes, who, while they were salable for money, were not gold itself; and he planned to take with him on Saturday to the tavern both Kitty and Ace, neither of which had cost him a dollar. One of them, or both, should satisfy the city man; or, if they did not, the five hundred dollars surely would.

If the days dogged Mede's heels in their haste, Hammond was impatient with their slow passage. Saturday morning, the gold in his poke, Hammond mounted Eclipse for his excursion to Benson, the three Negroes following on the gray mule, Kit in front, Mede in the middle, and Ace clasping him around the body, rearmost. No further word had come from Neri, but Ham was confident that he would be at the tavern. He was not there, however, and Pearl was as baffled at his failure to arrive as was Hammond.

"Ain't seen hide nor hair," Pearl declared. "Don't know only whut that fuggin' letter say. Reckon he comin' nex' week, 'lessen he caught the god damn vomit, or his boy. That vomit ragin' bad around New Orleans this time of summer."

The frequenters of the tavern had all seen Mede, but they admired him again, punching his abdomen, and feeling his thighs and arms. Hammond feigned to ignore their awe. He recognized the futility of seeking a match for his Negro; none was present to stand up to him. He didn't want a match, in fact, choosing to wait for the antagonist from the city; he didn't want the

boy maimed or injured in an earlier encounter.

Ace's white skin excited as much comment as Mede's powerful muscles.

"Whure you git him? He ain't yourn?" Alcorn wanted to know.

"Reckon Ham never started quite that early," said Alonzo Kyle. "Ain't five year difference. More like it Ham's daddy's git, but it don't look Maxwell."

"Wouldn't put past Ham a-tryin' when he five," Pearl laughed flatteringly.

"I bought him," Hammond explained in embarrassment. "Over around Briarfield."

"Too bad it got balls," said Asa Gore. "A griffe wench with eyes like this 'un worth a treasure."

"Who botherin' whut its eyes like," queried Kyle rhetorically, "if it ain't got tits?" He stepped to the bar, laid down a gold coin and beckoned to the house. The crowd guffawed, not so much at the joke, as at his invitation.

Sam Holden lingered with the line of Negroes, and demanded of Ace, "Who you reckon your pappy is, boy? Ain't Mista Hammond is it?"

Ace looked at the floor, too embarrassed to answer.

"I askin' you a question, nigger? Whyn't you answer me?"

"Naw, suh," mumbled Ace.

"Naw, suh, what? Who your pappy?"

"Masta Sime, suh, Masta, I reckon," Ace replied, recognizing that he was being badgered, but relishing the attention.

"Let the nigger be, Sam. Come here an' drink this fuggin' drink Mista Kyle is a-buyin' fer you." Pearl was more concerned about the consumption of whiskey than about Ace and his discomfiture.

Hammond bought a drink for all comers, but waited only for the first bout on the afternoon's program. Neither contestant suffered. The performance was tame, and the others scheduled did not promise excitement. Hammond, disappointed, herded his Negroes together and left the room.

As Hammond mounted his three boys on their mule, he was joined by Lewis Gasaway, who placed his arm about Ham's shoulder.

"Whut a matter, Hammond?" Gasaway demanded. "Ain't mad? Didn't hardly speak."

"I bought you a corn, didn't I? I ain't mad; I jest balked; that's all; 'bout that Frenchy not a-comin'. You ain't done nothin'."

"I was thinkin' maybe Papa—that is him a-goin to your papa about that Star?"

"That your papa; it wasn't you," Hammond said. "I don' hol' no grudge."

"Papa jest a squirt. Don' never min' whut he do," Lewis implored. "I craves bein' friends."

"We friends; we good friends," Hammond avouched, extending his hand, which Lewis grasped heartily. Both boys laughed in their embarrassment, but when Hammond rode away they were better friends than they had ever been.

The mule failed to keep pace with Eclipse, but Hammond gave the horse his head, trusting Mede to bring the other boys safely home.

The following Saturday, Ham had no better fortune. He went again to the tavern, taking with him his three Negroes; but Neri had not come and Pearl had no news about him. Redfield was confident that the man would someday show up, but Hammond was discouraged. He stayed through the fights, wagered and lost ten dollars on one of them, but was little interested. Even the whiskey he drank failed to raise his spirits.

Was his Mandingo fated to stagnate in ornamental desuetude? Was his investment to remain profitless? He knew that he could arrange no more local fights for Mede, who was so obviously undefeatable by any other fighter in the community. There was no object and little satisfaction in possessing a champion whom there was none to challenge.

On the ride home, Hammond considered the matter and reached a conclusion. After supper, through which he remained silent, he broached his project to his father over their toddies.

"Ain't no use," he began. "Reckon I goin' to sell him—git back all that money, part of it anyways. Take him along in the coffle."

"Who? Whut one you sellin'?" the old man asked absently.

"That god damn Mandingo—Mede!"

"Son! We ain't goin' to sell the bes' buck we got! You gone lunatic?"

"Ain't no good to us. Twenty-seven hundert jest a-rottin' away. I 'on't want no fighter, anyways."

"Well you jest dig up that pot tomorrer, and take out that twenty-seven hundert fer your own self. That Mandingo mine; I'm a-buyin' him from you. I wants him to breed with."

"Why, Papa, I paid out fer him with your money. He ain't mine, more than he yourn. You cain't buy him offn me."

"An' you cain't sell him offn me. I wants him. You kin pit him all you wants, an' you git a chancet, but you cain't sell him." There was a finality in the older man's tone.

However, his father's stand again assuaged Hammond's sense of guilt in his extravagance of spending so much money for a single slave. The extravagance was henceforth chargeable to the father. If Mede should grow old and decrepit without another fight, Hammond need feel no blame for having bought him.

CHAPTER 30

THE summer had been wet, and the cotton, while maturing well enough, was getting "in the grass." The hoe-gang had been dilatory and Hammond the following week put it to work with greater earnest. On Eclipse, he followed the choppers through the field and saw to it that the space between the plants was freed from weeds. There were plenty of slaves and it was not necessary to overwork any of them, but they would do nothing at all unless they were driven. It was dull for Hammond, sitting his horse and watching his Negroes at their sweatful task.

Discouraged, he had given over the supervision of Mede's training, which went ahead in a desultory manner, but the owner was indifferent. Thursday afternoon, Hammond, bored with watching his choppers, left them and went to the river, taking along a hoe-hand to help him about his boots and to hold Eclipse while he should swim. He had no more than removed his clothes and was standing on the stream's bank, ready to plunge when a great halloo came from the field. "Masta, suh, Masta, suh, a white ge'man on a hoss!" "Come quick, Masta, come quick; somebody comin'!" "Masta, Masta, here a white man!" The greater part of the disturbance was a mere excited scream of pleasure. The articulated sentences were jumbled and confused.

Hammond climbed to the top of the bank to ascertain for himself the cause of the alarm.

He saw a sleek bay horse with a rider in the habiliment of a white man, retreated to his pile of clothes, and hastily drew on his pantaloons and shirt without underclothing, reluctant that a strange white person should see his nudity. Unshod, he again climbed the bank to receive the visitor riding in his direction.

The man was Sam Holden, shouting over and over, "He's come. He's come, Mista Maxwell, he's come."

Hammond waited until Holden approached close enough to hear him against the summer breeze. "Who come? Whut you wants, Holden?"

"The man. The fightin' man from New Orleans. He's come. Pearl wantin' I should ride to tell you, say you come Sat'day an' fetch your big buck."

Hammond heard the tidings unmoved; he had relinquished his exigence for a fight, had consoled himself in his efforts to make a good crop of cotton. He returned to the streamside for the remainder of his clothing, which he threw over his horse's withers in front of the saddle, and mounted. As he led the way between the rows of cotton, he asked his guest, "He got a good nigger?"

"Big, tall, yaller varmint. I ain't a-knowin' kin he fight. I reckon he kin, or he wouldn't a-come," Holden drawled his uncertainty.

"Bigger'n mine?"

"Higher up, more lengthy reach, I reckon."

"Better?"

"Pearl say yourn the bes'; say yourn goin' to lick that yaller bastard first off. Me? I ain't knowin'."

"I'm obliged fer comin'. Right kin' of you," said Hammond as they reached the house.

"Whut I goin' to say to Pearl? That you comin' Sat'day?" the messenger asked without disposition to dismount.

"You comin' in," the host invited. "Cain't go withouten supper—all the way to Benson. My papa, he in the house."

That Holden was white trash did not absolve a gentleman from the obligations of hospitality. Indeed it rather enlarged than contracted those obligations. *Noblesse oblige.* Holden was still white.

"Better be gittin' on, back to tell Pearl you comin'," the man evinced his reluctance to enter the house where he suspected he might not be welcome. He wished to stay, but it required temerity to essay the gentleman.

"Anyway, you got time fer a dose of corn," Hammond urged, aware that Holden had nothing else than time.

The bait was too potent and the visitor slid from his saddle. "Well, an' if it won't put you out none," he conceded. "I ain't hardly fixed fer visitin'. These riggins!"

Hammond knew they were the only clothes the man possessed. "I sockless," he mentioned to put his guest at ease. "We ain't fine." He took his clothes from Eclipse's withers before turning the horse over to Napoleon, who had appeared to take both horses to the stables. Meg, grinning his pleasure at his master's return, held open the door and grabbed his underwear and boots.

Holden hesitated to enter. He scuffed his boots on the gallery floor as if to rid them of mud. "If I don' ack good—," he apologized in advance for his manners.

"Ain't no difference. Come right in," the host urged, leading the way into the sitting room. "You knowin' my papa, ain't you?"

"Usen to, oncet," said Holden diffidently. " 'Speck he forgotten me."

"Course not, course not," the older man greeted him. "Whut say the name?"

"Holden. Sam Holden," the son prompted. "Come from Pearl Remmick, tellin' me that New Orleans fightin' man come with his buck."

"Now I remember me. Holden. Set, Mista Holden, an' you Meg lift the gen'leman's hat. Have to be tol'?"

"An' bring some toddies, 'lessn you ruther have your corn without weakenin'."

"How you havin' yourn?" Holden confirmed. "Toddy right nice, if you please."

"Want yo' boots first off, Masta, suh?" Meg inquired, pointing to his master's bare feet.

"I tol' you toddies! Am I havin' to trounce you?" answered Hammond sternly.

Holden looked about him at the comfort of the room which seemed to him like luxury.

"Mede sof', I reckon, not trainin' him fer a week. I bin hoein' out of the grass," Ham explained. "I don' know had I better fight him come Satiday. Whut word I goin' to sen' Pearl?" he appealed to his father.

"Fight him! Course, fight him! Whut you bought him fer, ain't it? Cain't git him kilt more'n oncet." Maxwell was more sporting, less cautious, than his son.

"Sam say this man's buck nigger bigger'n Mede—higher, that is reachier."

"I'd admire to see it," declared the old man.

"See whut?"

"That fight. I knowin' I cain't straddle."

Blanche came down the stairs and through the hall. She had kept her word and, seeing the guest's arrival, had dressed to receive him. She was laced into her formal dress, fully shod, hair neatly combed. Despite her face, swollen and flushed by the heat, the toddies she had drunk, and the constriction of her bodice, Hammond was proud of her.

"This Miz Maxwell," Hammond introduced her.

Sam Holden rose and bowed. "I sure am right honored, ma'am," he declared. It was courtly. Without knowing the courage it required, Hammond envied the man his manner. His own stiff knee rendered such grace impossible for him. His estimate of Holden grew.

"I didn't git the name," said Blanche.

"Holden," said her husband and the guest in unison. "Sam Holden."

"Oh!" said Blanche. "Right warm."

"Right, ma'am."

Meg brought three toddies, served his older master first, then the guest and was uncertain as to the third. Hammond took it from the tray, ignoring Blanche. The boy, uncertain whether another was wanted, looked questioningly at his mistress and then at his master.

"My socks an' boots, boy! Have I gotten to tell you? Gittin' slothy!" Hammond evaded the subject of the toddy.

Meg brought the boots and knelt at his master's feet. Blanche, in pretended embarrassment at seeing her husband's toilet, rose and, excusing herself, left the room. Usage and a swallow of the toddy made easier the gallant bow the guest executed at her departure by way of the dining room. Her husband was aware that she had gone to the kitchen for a toddy, which she was not free to drink in the presence of the stranger.

As the young slave rose to his feet, Holden reached out and, taking him by the shoulder, drew him toward him, after which he felt of the boy critically, ran his hands over his body, and inserted his finger into his mouth to examine his teeth. Meg offered no resistance; he enjoyed the attention.

"Right pert young buck," Holden curbed his approval. "Ain't seen this among your bettin' boys, I reckon. Has I?"

"He twins. Other'n jest like this one, around som'ers," Hammond explained, in an assumption that Holden would recognize that the matching of the brace of boys so enhanced their value that he would not hazard one of them as a stake in a wager.

"I'd like me one like this 'un, jest to kind of wait on an' dress me. How much he bring, an' you sellin'?"

Hammond knew that Holden hadn't enough money to buy himself a drink at Pearl's tavern, not to mention a slave. "We wouldn't break 'em apart, I reckon. How much you offerin'?"

Holden shrugged and hedged, "Wouldn't want two, but on'y jest one; but this 'un jest the kin'." He repeated his digital examination of the boy. "Right purty; jest the kind. But I reckon I had better git me a slut an' raise me some. A buck fer body servantin' is jest a waste."

Hammond agreed.

"Niggers goin' down, anyways. They got to; they too high. Reckon I goin' to wait awhile," Holden resigned himself, although he retained his hold upon the boy, whose efforts to disengage himself were futile.

Hammond grew restive at his guest's mauling of the young Negro, and commanded the boy to fetch more toddies, despite that he did not want another. Meg extricated himself from Holden's embrace and skipped away. When he returned, he held his tray at arm-length for the guest to take his glass, his eyes turned toward his master in expectation of a reproof which the master failed to voice.

Much as Holden enjoyed the reception his betters gave him and much as he would have liked to remain for supper, he declined the invitation. His real reason was the fear he felt for his manners. He was not sure of himself in so fine a house. The reason he gave was, "Pearl be waitin' to close. He wantin' to know are you fightin', come Satiday."

"Reckon mayhap I comin', kin I ready my boy," said Hammond tentatively.

"We comin'," declared his father. "You tell that Remmick, we goin' to be there."

The son marked the plural first person, but assumed that it was only rhetorical.

However, after Holden had departed and Maxwell was again seated with another toddy, he announced, "I'm a-goin' along! Rheumatiz ain't goin' to stop me! In the surrey."

"Reckon you kin? Reckon it ain't too much?" Hammond questioned tentatively.

"Oh, I ain't a-goin' to put in, Son. It your nigger an' your fight. I jest an on-watcher;" he disclaimed his intention to interfere in his son's business, "but I'm a-goin'. Ol' rheumatiz a-betterin'. Could almost straddle, if somebody help me up."

"On wheels—an' you must go," said Hammond.

"I'm a-goin', I say," the old man expressed his determination.

It was good that Holden had not remained for Hammond found Blanche in the kitchen maudlin with drink, sprawled on a stool, her bodice open, and barefooted. Lucretia Borgia hovered over her, obeying the command to mix more toddies and imploring her mistress not to drink them.

"Please, Mist'ess, ma'am; that enough. You gettin' sick, an' Masta goin' to be mad," she argued.

Hammond was mad. "Why you give 'em to her?" he demanded from the cook.

"She say stir 'em," was Lucretia Borgia's only excuse. "She a-wantin' 'em. I tellin' her not."

"He ain't touch me. Ain't hardly pleasure me since we bin wed. He a-saying I ain't nice," Blanche wept. "But on'y my brother, my brother Charles. An' he dead. My poor dead brother. He'd pleasure me."

Hammond grasped the girl's arm, and raised her to her unsteady feet. "Hush up," he told her. "You ain't a-knowin' whut you sayin'." He led her through the passageway to the main house and toward the stairs. Lucretia Borgia followed in a desire to help her master.

"I 'on't care. You ain't. You lovin' up that Ellen nigger ever' night. Thinkin' I don't know. I wishin' my brother here right now," Blanche shouted thickly.

Hammond, supporting the girl with his right hand, slapped her face smartly with his left. He was in terror lest his father should hear her. He ordered Lucretia Borgia back to the kitchen. Blanche continued to sob, but ceased to talk. She did her best to climb the stairs, but slumped against the baluster in such a manner that Hammond was compelled partly to drag, partly to carry her.

"Hammon', I sick." She said at the top of the stairs, "I 'on't know whut's ailin' me."

"I knows fer sure; you drunk. Ain't you shame?" he chided. "I am wishin' I never seen you."

The girl was drooling, and before she reached her room she stopped short, dropped her head and voided the contents of her stomach, which splashed down the front of her dress and drenched the carpet, spattering on Hammond's boots. Her husband dragged her along, spewing the length of the hall and walking with her bare feet through the warm vomit. He opened the door and thrust her prone upon the bed.

"Do fer your mistress, an' clean that hall," he told Tense sternly, as though the blame were hers. The girl burst into tears at what she believed her master's displeasure with her. Hammond banged the door, and treaded carefully along the dark hall.

"Blanche sick," he announced to his father, aware that her state could not be long concealed. "I not a-wantin' she goin' to drink no more toddies.

Don't give her none hence."

"A little fer her achin' head not goin' to hurt."

"Achin' head! Shit! Let it ache her. She's drunk, sotten!"

"Reckon she not lose that child," speculated the older man.

"Hopin' she do, an' if she carry one. I ain't cravin' no spawn like that." The youth in his fury limped out of the room. The father heard the front door open and close and, watching through the window, saw his son pause at the edge of the gallery, heave a sigh, and disappear across the area in the direction of the Mandingo's cabin.

Mid-morning Friday, Blanche appeared in her Mother Hubbard. She made no mention of her debauch, nor did she ask for a toddy, which she knew Hammond had cautioned the servants not to give her. Maxwell, however, saw the girl's eyes following his glass as he lifted it to his mouth, and compassionately extended it to her. She grasped the goblet and avidly drained the hot, sweet liquid.

"Don't you go tellin' Ham I give you it," her father-in-law warned her.

"No, suh; I ain't a-goin'," she promised. "Warm, ain't it?"

Maxwell called Meg and ordered that his drink be replenished, while the girl fanned herself with the palmetto leaf.

As noon approached, Hammond came in from the cotton field. He kissed his father and his wife with equal want of fervor. Otherwise he ignored the woman. He refused the toddy that Meg brought him, untold, and ordered the boy to take it back to the kitchen.

"My head achin' me—awful bad," was the only hint that Blanche gave for her desire for a drink.

Hammond made no reply to her. "That Mede ain't doin' nothin'. Growin' sof', that whut; jest snoozin' time away," he told his father.

"Let him snooze, an' rest hisself," counseled the old man.

"Peevish with ol' Lucy, when she rubbin' him, won't turn over fer her to rub his back. Not a-drinkin' his raw eggs good, though I made him do that, a extra pitcher full."

The father nodded his approval.

"He not fitten to fight tomorrer," the son said doubtfully. "I don' know should I oil him out. He always costive."

"Let him be, an' stop frettin'. He fight, an' you tell him. Weaken him to oil him."

"I goin' to swim him afternoon."

"Won't hurt him none, in the broad sun, an' you wary to not ketch him a cold."

As the time approached for the contest, Ham's misgivings grew. He questioned whether his Mandingo was a fit opponent for the city Negro; doubted his own ability to cope and bargain with the white owner of the city black. What esoteric methods of training his fighter might the other have

used? What ruses, what tergiversations would the stranger employ against him in the arrangements of the fight.

Hammond acknowledged himself as a bumpkin, unschooled to parry city wiles. He could depend upon Redfield for advice, he knew, and Redfield was wise in the ways of the world; upon Lewis Gasaway for what he was worth, although Lewis' experience was no greater than his own; and upon Pearl Remmick, he believed, unless Pearl should see a profit in favoring the other side. He remembered that the man from New Orleans had addressed Pearl as his friend, although Pearl denied any acquaintance. Hammond feared his own gullibility. He should be wary.

At breakfast the following morning, Hammond sent Memnon to the kitchen to fetch Lucretia Borgia. "You lookin' after Miz Blanche," he told her, "while I away, you an' Tense. Take care of her an' give her whut she want, 'cept corn. Mark, 'cept corn."

" 'Ceptin' corn," Lucretia Borgia repeated.

"Don' see whyn't you won't take me 'long," complained Blanche.

"To a nigger fight in a tavern?" the husband asked, indignant at the suggestion.

"I could go an' visit Miz Forsythe," whined Blanche.

"Ain't room in the carriage."

"I kin go, seem like, instead of that big nigger buck. You lovin' him more than me."

"He my fightin' nigger. Don' you un'erstan'? Cain't have no fight withoutn him!" Hammond explained in disgust.

"Niggers, niggers, nothin' but niggers! Fightin' niggers!" Blanche exclaimed, and then subsided. "My head hurts me awful. Cain't I have no corn? Jest one, one toddy?" she wheedled.

"One; one ain't goin' to hurt her none," interposed Maxwell.

"Well, fetch you mist'ess one after she's et," Hammond conceded.

Such was Maxwell's enthusiasm for the unwonted excursion that he walked surely and unassisted, oblivious of his infirmity. He had some difficulty in climbing, with a boost from Memnon, into the front seat of the surrey; but, once settled, he stretched expansively and made himself comfortable. Mede rode behind, sandwiched between Star and Kitty. Hammond withdrew his pouch from his pocket, made sure of his gold, and replaced the pouch, before he took up the reins.

He looked behind him and commanded Kit, "Git over there, boy, an' set up straight. Stop your leanin' agin' Mede. He needin' his stren'th."

As the party drove away, Blanche stood barefooted on the gallery, her goblet in hand, flanked by Lucretia Borgia and Tense. Meg and Alph stood, or rather jumped in the middle of the driveway, waving unseen at their departing masters. Pole, as soon as he had relinquished the mare's bridles, trudged toward the barn to sleep until dinner time.

"Sure you not goin' to tire out?" Hammond expressed concern for his

father's comfort before the vehicle reached the public road.

"Sayin' I do? Sayin' I git bad?" hypothesized the rheumatic. "Better than rockin' at home, swiggin' corn all alone, a-waitin'—."

He was undisturbed by the summer sun which poured down on the carriage. Minor changes had occurred in the countryside since he had traversed the road. He remarked how much one tree had grown since he had seen it, another had fallen, areas brought under cultivation, gullies washed in a bank, a cabin built.

Before they reached Benson, Hammond paused in the roadside shade and took from the floor a basket of victuals Lucretia Borgia had prepared that the masters should not have to eat the food at the tavern. It contained fried chicken, boiled eggs, buttered biscuits, so cold that no odor of saleratus emanated from them. She had not forgotten a piggin of raw eggs for Mede.

The white men ate their fill, the elder occasionally pausing to hand to each of the Negroes in the rear seat a piece of chicken or a biscuit. When they had finished, Hammond passed the basket back for the boys to eat their fill. Mede made a mild protest at drinking the eggs after the other food, but Hammond firmly ordered him to drain the piggin.

"He's alus balkin' 'bout drinkin' down his eggs," Hammond complained. "They's good fer him, stren'thenin', an' he's goin' to swallow 'em, like 'em or don't. I ain't goin' to listen no more about it."

"Stren'thenin'; makes a nigger shine," agreed the old man.

Star watched Mede struggle to swallow the slimy mess and regretted that he was not the victim. Star knew that hen eggs were not for him, although he sucked the eggs of wild birds whenever he could find them.

Kitty leaned forward and whispered in his master's ear his need to pee-pee, which reminded Maxwell of his own filling bladder. The Negroes all crawled from the carriage, and Mede helped his old master get down, lifting him bodily. Hammond remained in the carriage, holding his horses, while the Negroes modestly disappeared in the brush and Maxwell urinated in the dust of the road.

He felt relaxed and refreshed after the pause, when Mede lifted him back to his seat.

"Wonder how big that other 'un goin' to be. Holden say he higher up than ourn," Hammond began to stew.

"Holden white trash. He ain't knowin'," his father sought to console him.

"Wonder has that New Orleans man got a good bettin' boy," Hammond went on. "I not cravin' to bet away all this gold."

"You aimin' to win, ain't you? Well? All the same, gol' or niggers."

Hammond subsided, or at least did not voice the anxiety he might have felt.

Despite their early arrival at the tavern, it was apparent that things had already begun to stir. A half dozen horses were at the rack, and a murmur of talk came through the open door.

Hammond hitched his team in the shade of a large maple across the road from the tavern, helped his father to alight, and told the slaves to stay where they were. "Don' git down fer nobody, 'lessen I tells you—not even if a white man say. An' don't you eat nothin' nobody a-goin' to give you. Hear? Somebody tryin' to pizen you afore you fights."

"Eh," scoffed his father at his precautions.

The son led the father across the road, steadied him as he stepped upon the porch, and guided him into the tavern. Talk stopped in deference to so important a personage. Redfield was first to see and greet his friend.

"Couldn't trus' the boy, eh? Got to come?" Redfield suggested. "Boys, Ham's age, reckless, I reckon, bets too heavy. Got to hol' 'em down. How the rheumatics?"

"You know, Doc, Hammond trusty. I ain't no part of this fight. Jest felt like comin' along to watch—plumb outsider. Hammond kin bet ever' nigger an' every dollar on Falconhurst, he seein' that way." Maxwell underlined his disinterest so that his presence might not impair his son's prestige at the tavern.

"I jest a-coddin'," Redfield repaired his error. "Ham ain't a-needin' no didy changer."

Pearl hastened out from behind the bar to draw up a spindle-backed wicker-seater armchair for his honored guest, and grasped his arm to lower him into it.

"Nev' mind, never min'," Maxwell at once repulsed and accepted the attention, pleased with his reception. "Corn fer everybody, mine with hot water an' a little sweetenin'. Son you pay."

"Got to wait, suh, whiles I hotten some," Pearl apologized. "Ain't no call fer toddies. Won't take more than a minute."

"Don' stir yourself. I reckon I kin wait." Maxwell blinked in his effort to adjust his eyes to the interior darkness after the brightness of the sun. He squinted toward a figure against the bar and asked, "Ain't that Mista Brownlee?"

The other, unsure of his reception, came forward and extended his hand. "If it ain't Mista Maxwell, well! well! I'm often a-thinkin' about my visit to your place—whut do you call it, Falconhurst?—an' your good vittles an' fine stock, specially that span o' saplin's. Sure like to buy 'em offn you. I knows jest whure I kin sell 'em, know jest the man to want 'em—fer pets, jest pets. I pay a good sum."

Maxwell shook his head and changed the subject. "How you make with them two you traded me out of?"

"Them two unsound bucks? I didn't lose nothin'," admitted Brownlee, by which he acknowledged that he had done well.

"How's niggers in gen'al?" Maxwell queried.

"They's high, still high. Cain't buy 'em."

"Thought maybe that new Louisianie law goin' to cheapen 'em."

Brownlee sniffed. "Nobody pay no attention to that fool law. Course, you cain't sell 'em at public cry in New Orleans, unless you makes out they bin a year in the state; but niggers ain't knowin' whure they comes from and nobody a-carin'."

"Mine all a-knowin' they Alabama."

"Learn 'em to say they Louisiana. Private treaty better anyways, if you got prime stock. They goin' to take that law back, come Assembly. Planters needs niggers—cain't breed 'em fast as they kills 'em in the cane."

Pearl brought Maxwell's toddy and waited for him to taste it. "Sweet enough, suh?" he asked, subdued and solicitous.

"Best I ever drunk," Maxwell savored the drink.

The party crowded around the bar to obtain their drinks at the Maxwell expense.

"Reckon you mayhap owns that boy we come to fight, Mista Brownlee?" broached Hammond suspiciously.

"Wishin' I did," said the buyer, raising his drink to his host and downing it. "Whupped ever'thin' around about. Worth a fortune, jest about."

"Where is he?" Hammond appealed to Pearl. "Whure the owner?"

"He gittin' ready his boy, rubbin' him. He'll come," Pearl parried. The less the haste, the more whiskey would be consumed.

"Course I knowin' Mista Neri, travelin' with him clean across from Natchez," Brownlee admitted.

"You tellin' him about my buck, I reckon? How else he know?"

"You didn't have no fighter when I was by. Got him after. I ain't seen him," Brownlee protested his interest in the fight.

The room was filling. Alcorn brought his boy for Maxwell's approval. "This the gen'man I tellin' you about," he explained to the lad, "with all them fine niggers out on his plantation. You watch out, be good, work hard, an' save your money, you'll grow up jist like him. Ain't that fine?"

"But watch out not to git rheumatiz," Maxwell cautioned the boy, flattered to be set up as an exemplar for youth and uncertain whether he should deny his fitness.

The fat Alcorn child stared him up and down blankly, accepting his sire's estimate but vague about how he should emulate the great man and doubtful why.

Lewis Gasaway wandered in, looking first for Hammond. He saw the elder Maxwell and stopped to pay his respects. "I see you brung Star. He lookin' well. Bettin' him?" he asked. "I hopin' you not mind whut Papa sayin', Mista Maxwell. Me? I real plagued how he carryin' on."

"I know your papa."

"I not a-wantin' Hammon' mad with me."

"Don't fret, Lewis; Hammond like you. He yander."

Before Lewis was able to make his way to where Hammond stood before the bar, the side door, which led to the sleeping rooms of the tavern, opened

and a swarthy, squat, muscular man appeared. Hammond knew who it was before Pearl announced, "Here Mista Neri now!"

"Did he come? That Mista Maxwell?" demanded the Italian.

"This him," Pearl indicated.

Neri was direct. "Bring your boy?" he asked Hammond. "Want to fight him?"

"I ain't seen yourn," Ham refused to commit himself.

"Don't want to see yours. I'll fight him," said Neri aggressively. "I'll fetch out Topaz when comes the time. He's restin'."

"I seen him—not shucked down—but I seen him," Pearl intruded into the negotiations, anxious that they should not fall through. He paused to be asked for his opinion.

Hammond asked it, "He big?"

"He high up. Ain't sayin' he little, but ain't no scuffler, as I kin see. Yourn kin whup, whup easy—that is I reckon, fur as I see." Pearl guarded his prognosis, as also, in deference to Maxwell's presence, he restrained his profanity.

"Gen'leman ain't seen Mede," called Maxwell impatiently from his chair. "You ain't a-choosin' a damn whore. Cain't tell, lookin' at him, kin he fight. Pit 'em, an' see who whups." The father did not want his son's caution to deprive him of the spectacle he had come so far to see.

"Mista Maxwell, there, more sportin' than Hammon'," remarked young Gasaway.

Maxwell resented the comparison. "Hammond sportin', sportin' like old Theophilus," he asserted confidently. "He goin' to fight. Ain't askin' to see the othern, 'less the gen'leman cravin' to see hisn."

"I got to see his bettin' nigger, howsumever," Hammond stipulated, and by these words conceded his willingness to make the match without an examination of the opposing fighter.

"Whut bettin' nigger? I don't fight my boy fer little niggers. I fight fer spondulix, nothing short," declared Neri with a show of scorn.

"I tellin' you, Mista Maxwell, Mista Neri not liable to match fer niggers," Pearl reminded Ham.

Hammond gave a sidelong glance at his father, who was unmoved, then asked, "How much?"

Neri drew from his pocket a sheaf of greenbacks and cast them loosely on the counter. "There five thousand—all I got. Any part of it. Mista Remmick, here, let him hold the stakes an' run the fight, judge it."

From the crowd of onlookers there was an audible suspiration, from one man a whistle of amazement. Alcorn boosted his fat son even with the counter to enable the boy to see so much money.

The proposal bewildered Hammond. He produced his pouch and shook its gold upon the counter. "That five hundert. I ain't a-riskin' no more. It all I brung."

Neri reached for his roll of bills, folded it with a sneer, and returned

it to his pocket. He started to walk away.

"Wait!" said Redfield, turning Neri back. "I might go two hundred on Ham's buck. I ain't got so much along, but Pearl here knows I good fer it."

Lewis Gasaway came forward and stacked fifty dollars beside Hammond's pile of gold. "I backin' Ham's nigger," he declared.

"I ain't risking my Topaz fer coppers. Not afeared that he won't win, but he may git hurt. Wouldn't have him battered fer seven-fifty. Twenty-five hundred, anyway; that's the lowest."

"Cover it! Cover it!" Maxwell urged Hammond.

"I never brung on'y five hunert. I ain't a-betting more, 'ceptin' it be a nigger," Hammond's discretion overbore his humiliation.

"Go around to Banker Meyer. He let you have two thousand till Monday," urged Maxwell. "I'll sign. Won't take more than a minute—or half hour."

"When we got to borrow money to bet, I stops a-fightin'. We ain't debted and ain't a-goin' to debt," affirmed the son.

"Well!" the old man struggled to rise. "You ain't goin' to fight him, I reckon we take the Mandingo home an' put him over the fireplace to look at. Ever stuff a nigger, Doc Redfield? Reckon you kin make him look nat'chell? Hammond wantin' you to stuff his Mandingo. It hisn. I don't say nothin'."

"You still got them span o' twins, Mista Maxwell, suh?" asked Brownlee, detaching himself from the crowd. "They still sound and well, an' they not blistered?"

"You hear my son say we ain't debted."

"I will give Mista Neri two thousand fer the two of 'em, an' if he win 'em. Put 'em up with Hammond's five hundred against Neri's twenty-five hunderd," the dealer proposed. "You knows them two squirts ain't worth it, but I give it—two thousand. I got a fool in New Orleans a-wantin' fancies. Pets, jest pets. Needn't fret whure they goin'. They live—best in the lan'."

Maxwell resumed his chair, and ordered another round of drinks.

"You know, Papa, we promise Lucretia Borgia," Hammond interposed. "We cain't sell 'em withoutn her say."

"Not sell 'em, but we kin bet 'em," Maxwell rationalized a distinction.

"Promise to a nigger!" scoffed Brownlee. "Nobody goin' to hold you to it!"

The offer was enticing. A thousand dollars each for sapling boys. They were more valuable as a matched brace than singly, it was true, and they were choice boys, delicately made, alert, and responsive. On the other hand, there was a chance, a remote chance, that they would not make into big, muscular men. Maxwell remembered when, before the war with Britain, the La Fitte brothers had sold smuggled bozal Negroes in New Orleans by the pound. There was still value in weight, and the twins would never be big. Even for house slaves, size and musculature had its value.

Kit's belly, or even Tiger's, would serve as well as Alph's as a reservoir to receive Maxwell's rheumatism.

Maxwell sipped the toddy which Pearl had brought him. "Ham's say, I reckon. Them saplin's hisn, also. Be me, I'd take you up, Mista Brownlee. But it ain't me."

"Yourn a-goin' to win, anyways, Hammond," argued Pearl. "Ain't no risk."

"But they ain't here. I cain't bet 'em," Hammond hesitated.

"I drop out tomorrow an' pick 'em up, if Neri wins 'em. I trust you. I post my two thousand and your five hunderd agin' Mista Neri's twenty-five hunderd. Ifn he win, he take all the money an' I takes the span of twins."

Hammond reluctantly, against his judgment and with fear in his heart, agreed to the wager. Neri did not understand the arrangement, or pretended not to understand. It had to be explained to him twice.

"That's all right," he added, "jest so I git the money. Put up the real money with Mista Remmick. But I take no responsibility that these Maxwells will give you the niggers if they lose. I thought they was rich, or I wouldn't a-come. If you cain't afford it, there's still time."

Hammond again emptied his purse on the counter, Brownlee counted out two thousand dollars, and Neri matched the joint sums. Pearl raked all together, wrapped the gold in the greenbacks and placed the whole sum in his pocket. Neri bought a round of drinks for the house, lifted his glass to Hammond, barely touched his lips to the whiskey and pushed it from him.

"We savin' the big fight to the las'," Pearl announced. "Ain't any you other gen'lemen brung your varmints?"

" 'Ceptin' Mista Gore, over there, ain't none brung none," Holden told the impressario. "Gore's nigger cain't fight hisself."

"I reckoned with Ham's buck matchin' that other one, wouldn't be no interest in no other fightin'," said Alonzo Kyle apologetically. "I could brung one."

"Me, too," a dozen men muttered, one to another, some of whom owned no slaves at all.

"To tell truth, my ol' man a-watchin' I don't sneak none out. I tried," confessed Lewis Gasaway, laughing in his embarrassment. "Don't hold with me a-fightin'—'lessen I wins."

"Well, bring on you god damn fuggers," Pearl forgot himself, "An' let's see 'em." He had delayed the fight as long as possible, but now the crowd was milling with impatience and the less ardent were likely to leave. No drinks were being sold.

Redfield followed Hammond across the road to summon Mede, while Neri disappeared through the side door to bring his fighter. Maxwell remained seated. Gasaway, Gore, Kyle and a few others straggled out as far as the porch, but did not venture into the pouring sun. The larger number remained at the bar to see the new fighter emerge. The division of the crowd was a rough indication of partisanship, although some men reserved their allegiance until they should see the fighters, and others, who had no intention of

laying bets, were interested in the fight for its own sake and indifferent as to which side should win.

Mede was asleep in the back of the surrey, mouth agape, one arm about the shoulder of Star, who snuggled against him, also asleep. Yellow Kit sat patiently, watching what he could see of the happenings at the tavern. The sun had shifted until the carriage was no longer shaded, although all but the flanks of the horses were. Hammond reached across Kit, grasped Mede's leg, and shook him awake.

"Come on! Git down. It goin' to start," said the owner, without relinquishing his hold.

"Whut, Masta, suh?" asked the indifferent slave.

"That fightin'. You knows I goin' to fight you this evenin'; doesn't you?"

"Yas, suh; yas, suh," the big Negro drawled, half awake. He gently withdrew his arm from around Star, without disturbing his slumber, and got out the far side of the vehicle. He stood stretching himself until he was fully awake.

"All you ponders is sleepin'," Hammond censured. "Ain't aimin' to fight. Ain't thinkin' nothin'! I reckon we goin' to be whup. That othern is a gyascutus, ever'body sayin'!" That nobody had said any such thing did not alter Hammond's concept of Mede's opponent as a fire-breathing dragon. As the time for the combat neared, Neri's fighter grew more formidable in Ham's imagining.

"I still a-bettin' my two hundert on yourn, if I kin find somebody." Redfield's confidence or loyalty was unshaken. "He goin' to be all right. Don' be so shaky."

The owner and the veterinarian flanked the big Negro to lead him across the road. The party on the porch parted to let the trio enter the room, and straggled after. If Hammond heard, he failed to answer Kit's, "Masta, suh, please kin I come?"

The crowd left an open space before Maxwell's chair, where Hammond paused. Men crowded to look over others' shoulders at the fighter, who, conscious of the scrutiny and now fully awake, began a nervous flexing of his muscles and shifting of stance.

"Quiet down. You ain't no stud horse," ordered the old man. "Shuck off his clo's, an' let folks see him."

Mede looked at Hammond for confirmation of the command, and at a nod began ripping himself out of his two garments, which he cast on the floor at Maxwell's feet. He towered naked before the crowd, unable to refrain from flexing his muscles. He tried to control himself.

"How you feelin'?" Hammond asked solicitously.

"Cain't you see? He all right. Quiet yourse'f, Son," said the old man.

A murmur of discussion ran through the onlookers.

"Kin I touch it, Papa?" queried the Alcorn boy in the front row.

"I reckon you jest kin," accorded his sire. "The gen'leman ain't a-goin' to

keer. Grow up to be a good judge of nigger flesh."

The boy edged forward, laid his hand on Mede's thigh, his eyes fixed on the vast genitals, toward which the boy's hand wandered.

"Not his creeker," the father warned. "It ain't nice. Besides, Maxwell wouldn't like you to play with his creeker jest when he fightin'."

The boy, diverted from his objective, raised his arm and with the palm of his hand slapped Mede's buttock as hard as he was able, whereupon Alcorn took the boy by the shoulder and pulled him back among the onlookers. Mede showed no cognizance of the blow.

Two or three adults reached out to stroke the Negro admiringly. Alonzo Kyle commented somewhat idly to Hammond, "Gotten him a little fat, ain't you? Seem-like, jest a shade."

Redfield went quickly to his defense. "They ain't no lard on him, not a bit. He all sound meat. He jest big-made," Hammond grunted, whether in gratitude to the doctor or in doubt lest the accusation be true, he did not himself know.

The side door opened and Neri appeared, followed by his gladiator, naked and glowering, and the crowd shifted its attention, leaving Mede alone in front of Maxwell's chair. Even Hammond, anxious for an appraisal of the challenger, moved with the others. Maxwell, who felt himself deserted, extended his arm toward Mede for help in rising from the chair, and the naked black boy sustained him as he made his way into the crowd that gathered about Neri and his man. Maxwell, the match being already made, was less curious than his son about the other fighter; it was only the desire not to be isolated that prompted him to move toward the circle about the door where Neri and his Topaz stood, impatient of the delay. Mede, noting that his old master was unable to see Topaz over the crowd in front of him, stooped and lifted him to his shoulder. Maxwell, resentful of the implication that he was not tall enough to see above the crowd, kicked the boy soundly with his booted heel, and demanded to be put down.

But he had had a good look at Topaz, a lanky mulatto, possibly a quadroon, whose height Maxwell over-estimated at twenty hands. He wasn't, in fact, so tall by a good two inches, but he was tall, obviously taller than Mede. Maxwell's entire impression of the Negro was one of length, length of leg, length of arm, length of body, length of neck, length of head, length over all, length and leanness, stringiness. The muscles were bunched and were individually visible as the joints articulated. Maxwell failed to note the capacity of the huge thorax, although it was increased at least in appearance by a pigeon breast. The long, sloping shoulders seemed wider than they were by contrast with the body's taper to a small, lithe waist and rumpless hips. The rib formation was distinct, which led Maxwell to believe, at least to hope, that the man was underfed, despite his reasoning that no owner would risk his money on a starved fighter.

No mere youth, Topaz was fully thirty and possibly thirty-five years old,

past his prime perhaps as a fighter, but seasoned and experienced in all the tricks and stratagems of his enforced vocation. In contrast with the glabrous Mede, a ridge of hair straggled down Topaz's sternum and spread above his nipples; it had been shortened to mere stubble, as was his pubic hair, which showed the nicks of the scissor marks. The shortened hair on the chest covered but did not conceal a tattooed crucifix suspended by a tattooed chain about the neck. Not permitted by the conventions of fighting to wear a real crucifix or religious medal, Neri relied upon the tattoo as a protection. The protection it offered was not only divine but mundane for no antagonist would flout such a symbol. To strike the tattoo would court defeat not only at the hands of Topaz but at the hands of God.

Topaz's skull was long and lean, like the other parts of him. It rose to a pinnacle which was accentuated by his high, retreating forehead, a receding hair line, a sunken-cheeked lantern-jaw, small, amber, feral eyes, red and lashless, narrowly together under scant but meeting brows.

It was easy to see that the two incisors on the right side of his upper jaw were broken off or missing, and his other visible teeth were pitted and stained. The most repellent aspect of the ugly creature, however, was the absence of ears.

Neri's abrupt manners and laconic speech discouraged questions, but Holden, leaning over Asa Gore's shoulder, ventured to ask him, "Whut 'come of his years? Didn't he never have none?"

Neri seemed to feel himself on the defensive and replied, "He got one tore in a fracas, time back; and, cuttin' it off, I thought it well to slice off the other side. Didn't we, Topaz? Save it from tearin'."

Topaz cocked his head in order to hear his master. "Yes, suh; save tearin' it off," he concurred. "Ain't nothin' to tear," he added, with a giggle through the void in his denture.

"Them burns, though, I didn't do them. He had 'em when I bought him," Neri absolved himself of wanton mutilation of his slave.

"Yes, suh," Topaz elucidated, feeling behind him, "Masta Henry burn my ass when I 'fuse to fight; it long while back, 'fore I didn't have no powder. I feared, that time. Ain't no more. Masta give me powder now."

It was a hint, a plea, upon which Neri acted. Drawing a phial from his pocket, he shook from it into Topaz's hand a small cone of white powder, which the Negro raised to his nose and inhaled at a single sniff. He wiped the residue upon his thigh, leaving a lighter spot upon the flesh.

"Whut that stuff you got smeared on it?" demanded Lewis Gasaway, noting the immediate moisture of the powder.

"It nothin', only lard," replied Neri, blandly. "Don't you all smear lard before fighting? Slicks, makes the strikes glance. Keeps the other one from gettin' aholt."

Hammond glanced at Mede, whose snake oil had ceased to serve such a purpose.

"Stand 'em together," suggested Pearl, "so that the gent'men kin see which one they goin' to bet."

Hammond limped forward, grasped Mede by the arm and led him to the center of the crowd, that comparison might be possible. Topaz was at some aesthetic disadvantage beside the youthful black symmetry of Mede, although he towered above him in stature. The consensus was that the slaves were well matched.

"Whut you reckon he be?" Redfield approached Maxwell. "Jest an Angola, ain't he?"

"Cain't tell fer sure," appraised Maxwell, "watered down so much with white. Tribes mixes after they gits here. I'd say, off hand, Kromantee, but whut difference? On'y question, kin he fight?"

"Time a-runnin', gen'lemen," announced Pearl. "Ain't you goin' to bet?"

Redfield, Gasaway and a few others posted their bets upon the Mandingo, which Neri immediately covered and looked around for more victims. Alcorn produced ten dollars, which Neri scorned to be bothered with, whereupon Alcorn sought elsewhere among the throng for a taker. When Neri refused to cover his bet upon Mede and the other men ignored his offer, he finally split his ten dollars into two fives, one of which he placed on the Neri slave, and the other upon that of Maxwell; so, he was sure of victory. He also proposed a bet against the five-cent copper piece which his son treasured in the pocket of his pantaloons, offering the boy his choice between the contenders. The child produced his coin, willing to accept the wager, but insisting that the stakes be posted with Pearl, who was too busy for such nonsense. Alcorn finally satisfied his offspring by producing his own copper and giving it to the boy to hold.

"I not knowin' which one I goin' to bet," pondered the scion. "Which one goin' to beat, Papa? I wants to bet the one that goin' to beat."

"Ain't nobody know that, Buddy," the father explained. "Anybody knowin' that, wouldn't be no call them niggers fightin'. Got to pick yourn an' take your chancet."

The young gambler, undecided, dodged between the legs of the circle of onlookers for a final survey of the Negroes, and made his way out to announce, "I takin' the high one. He the one goin' to beat, ain't he, Papa?"

"I glad you pickin' him acause I pickin' Mista Maxwell's. That Mista Maxwell always lucky; look how rich he be."

A rumble of talk, claims and counterclaims, opinions and refutations, arguments and rebuttals, echoed about the building. Nobody attended what another said. All the whites, except the Alcorn boy and Neri, had been drinking; some had drunk too much, but only one fight between spectators had threatened and Remmick, coming from behind his counter, had easily quelled that. Pearl maintained order in his tavern and all knew it. Moreover, none chose to risk expulsion, which would include exclusion from the fight.

Remmick delayed as long as he was able. Only one fight was on the after-

noon's program and all the customers would straggle away as soon as it was over. Men had arranged their wagers; the sale of whiskey had stopped; the circle around the fighters had broken; and the groups of threes and fours that gossiped and speculated were growing restless.

"We a-startin' up. All you all gen'lemen repair to the back yard. We startin'," Pearl proclaimed; and, as an afterthought, enjoined Holden, "Fetch along Mista Maxwell's chair, Sam, an' set him in the shade whure he kin see good."

"They ain't no shade, savin' agin' the fence," replied Holden, picking up the chair.

The throng moved through the rear door, promptly but with order. Everybody wanted a place of vantage, but there was no struggle for it. Holden chose the most level place he could find for Maxwell's chair, with its back to the west that the sun might not be in its occupant's eyes. Lewis Gasaway courteously remained behind to lead and guide the invalid to the reserved seat of honor. The onlookers found their places around a roughly circular area, demarcated by Maxwell's chair on one side and by the Alcorn boy, who squatted, frog-fashion, on the other.

Brownlee, who had stayed discreetly away from Neri, none the less remained behind to offer him any aid he might need; and the overtly partisan Redfield tarried to second Hammond. Their aid was not required. Holden filled the tin cup the bar reserved for Negroes and set it on the counter, but neither manager chose to use it. Topaz extended his arm toward Neri, opening and closing his fingers nervously. The owner, recognizing the meaning of the gesture, again withdrew the phial from his pocket and poured a cone of powder into the slave's open hand. Deftly and surely Topaz raised his hand and the powder disappeared at a single sniff.

"More in the bottle. It half full. If we win—," the master promised.

"I a-goin' 'a," affirmed the Negro.

"Course you are," said Neri, reaching to pat the yellow shoulder with assurance and affection.

Redfield nudged Hammond. "I knows whut he givin' him," he confided knowingly. "Make him wil' while it last, but it won't las'. Countin' on winnin' quick. Tell your buck fight slow, wear him out."

"This nigger cain't whup, noways," Ham conceded. "Ain't train, cain't make him. I bein' a fool. That Topaz buck whetted sharp."

"We goin' to win," Redfield affirmed with a show of confidence he didn't feel. He turned to Holden, behind the counter. "Give Mista Maxwell a corn. He needin' it."

Sam set out glasses, filled them, and touched the cup as a reminder. The white men drank. Mede looked askance at his master, opened his mouth to speak, but was silent; he wanted to buck Hammond up, for whose faint heart he felt a kind of sorrow, but sensed that to voice his own confidence would only aggravate the owner's despair. Mede harbored neither fear nor doubt.

He had a job to do, the job for which he had been purchased, and what would be, would be. His money was not at stake and he had no interest in the twins, no concern for his own body, for the pommeling he was about to receive, for the pain he must undergo. His body was the property of another; the other accepted the risk. In the glory of victory, however, he should share, as he must partake, if it should come, in the shame of defeat. These only were Mede's stakes, victory or vanquishment.

Pearl appeared at the door, impatient of the delay. Neri and his fighter, he said, were waiting at the ringside, ready.

"Come 'long," Hammond said. He limped through the open door, followed by the towering Mandingo, in his barbaric bronze nakedness, with Redfield bringing up the rear. The crowd parted to give them a place at the ring, and Redfield continued around the space to Maxwell's chair, squatting beside it.

Pearl made his way to the center of the area and raised his hand superfluously for quiet which had already settled on the sun-drenched spectators. "Last, we ready. We goin' to start in. I don' know the why all this fuggin' waitin'!" he deprecated the delay. "You-all knows about this event. You knows it between Mista Neri, come clean from New Orleans with his nigger, an' Mista Ham Maxwell of Falconhurst with his big varmint you-all seen fight here afore now. Mista Neri's boy name of Topaz, somethin' like that—"

"That right—Topaz," Neri nodded.

"An' Mista Hammond's name of Mede. They 'bout the biggest bucks, an' the fines' ever honor this here arena. Mista Neri an' Mista Hammon' both puttin' up big stakes—money an' niggers. Both these bucks been trainin' an' worked down right fine, seem like. We goin' to see somethin' choice, something like whut ain't never bin seen in Benson afore this, somethin' like whut they does in New Orleans." He ended, as he always did, with "Let 'em FIGHT," and he lowered his arm.

Neri cautioned Topaz not to forget to cross, and made the sign on his own front.

The owners simultaneously clapped their respective fighters on the shoulder and propelled them forward into the ring. Topaz danced out with a show of footwork in demonstration of his eagerness, his porcine eyes scanning the spectators for their approval. If Mede was equally keen, it was not apparent. He strode stolidly to the center of the ring, planted his feet on a broad base, and raised his arms for defense. But his defense was futile. Topaz danced around him, striking him with his long arms almost at will, and forcing him to shift his awkward base. A dozen powerful blows found the exact marks toward which they were directed, and a score of minor ones were deflected or glanced from their intended target. One mighty punch landed with a dull impact beneath Mede's eye, which began to swell, another cut his thick upper lip, which bled profusely, still another bruised the region just below the heart.

Topaz was a boxer, skillful and precise. He frisked in and away again

before Mede was aware, each time planting his knuckles just where he chose. Mede warded the blows as best he could, but each time he intercepted a feint of Topaz's right hand, Topaz countered with his left, which found its mark. Mede seemed unable to counter, unable to block, and unable to strike. He was stolid in the acceptance of his chastisement.

This was no fight, it was a mere flogging. The spectators began to jeer.

Topaz ceased to dance away. He was wasting his energy in avoidance of an enemy who couldn't strike, wasting his skill upon an impotent adversary. Mede, however, absorbed the blows like a bag of sand. He just stood and took what came. Imperturbable as an ox at the sacrifice, he stood.

Topaz retreated for a deep breath. He was fatigued from victory. He returned with a fresh fury to the kill. Another blow and yet another. But he was making no impression upon this block of granite, this immovable object. He began to swear at Mede, to curse him, to vilify him—with every punch an evil name, reflections upon his ancestors, his origin, his life, his nature, his practices, and his progeny until the end of time. A slave has no honor to defend, even if Mede had understood the opprobrium his antagonist lavished upon him. To Mede even the English words were vague and meaningless, and English is deficient in scurrility. The English tongue is too squeamish. But Topaz retreated to what passed for Creole French and bastard Italian, from which he had garnered a picric vocabulary. He only half knew the meanings of his invectives; he knew only that they were lewd, filthy, feculent and vituperative. The words that squirted through Topaz's broken teeth spattered inane and uncomprehended upon their target. They failed to anger Mede.

But he had taken enough blows. He moved forward, making no effort to ward himself. He poised himself, closed his fist and slung at his opponent, caught him on the upper sternum, right on the crucifix. Neri gasped at Mede's temerity; he expected the divine wrath. Topaz staggered two steps backward. Mede sent another blow to the same spot. Topaz staggered, slipped on a stone and went down on his back. Mede made a plunge for him and fell on top of him, pinning his shoulders. Topaz extricated his arms from between their bodies, circled Mede's waist and with the heavy nails of his long fingers, clawed and ripped the skin of Mede's back. Eight streams of blood trickled through the sweat. Again Topaz raked Mede's back, and destroyed the pattern his fingers had made. More blood oozed and trickled.

Mede sought to entwine his legs with those of his adversary, but Topaz was too agile. He succeeded with short punches to Topaz's face, but his arm lacked leverage. He made for Topaz's eye to gouge it from its socket, but the nimble, yellow boy writhed on the ground, tumbled Mede's body to one side, and sprang to his feet. His back was scraped by small stones, and his sweat was muddied with soil. No blood flowed from the abrasions, though Topaz was aware of a sting from the scouring. When Mede sought to rise, a smart blow from Topaz knocked him back to a sitting position, whence by reaching out he grasped Topaz knee and brought him down, his head in Mede's lap.

Topaz bared his broken teeth to bite Mede's genitals, but by a turn Mede eluded him, extricated his legs from beneath Topaz's body, and sprang upright. The more agile Topaz was also again on his feet. He was again sparring, boxing, whipping sharp, stinging, gadfly blows to Mede's head and face. Mede felt them, ducked his head to avoid them, but there was little force in their impact. They teased him and smarted, but they did not rock or stagger him. His face was bruised and swollen, his left eye all but closed, his brow cut and bleeding, but the right eye smiled with confidence and contempt. No longer did Topaz dance, the resilience had left his legs and feet. His fists still flew, but his arms were tired. He had lost his cockiness and his face was grim with a bloodlessness that beneath his yellow skin seemed like a pallor. His invective too had ceased. He was silent.

Maxwell leaned back in his chair, chuckling at the spectacle. That his Negro was being whipped, impaired but did not destroy his relish of the contest. He marvelled at Topaz's skill, the certainty and precision of his blows, the agility with which he ducked the occasional heavy fist Mede threw in his general direction. A country trained Negro couldn't hope to compete with one trained in the city—a blundering bumpkin against the schooled expert. Maxwell admired a winner. He was not one to disparage superiority just because he did not own it. He could chuckle in defeat.

"My two hunert ain't gone yet," Redfield whispered over Maxwell's shoulder. "I ain't a-givin' up."

"Might as well kiss good-bye that two hunerd," Maxwell looked up at his friend.

Mede found an opening and planted on Topaz's long jaw a blow that staggered him backward. Topaz's hand went to his face to feel the injury, to feel whether the jaw was broken. There was a long sigh from the spectators, who turned to their neighbors in uncertain comment.

"He ain't done yet. I was thinkin' it about over."

"Jesus!"

"That varmint of Hammond Maxwell's is powerful powerful, when he kin git there."

"Trouble is that othern won't hol' still."

Alonzo Kyle rubbed his own jaw, so vivid was the suggestion of Mede's blow.

Hammond Maxwell edged about the ring in the direction of Brownlee. He was aghast, livid at the thought of defeat, the loss of the twins. "Mista Brownlee," he muttered, "I'm givin' you two thousand dollars fer them boys. They ain't worth it, but Papa, he ain't wantin' to part."

Brownlee shook his head.

"Twenty-five hunderd. That five hunderd profit fer you."

"They fancies. I gits me five thousand fer 'em, I gits 'em to New Orleans. A Frenchy waitin' fer 'em."

The fight was decided, but it continued. The spectators lost interest. A

group of three went into the tavern for a drink, calling Holden from the ringside to serve them. Nobody was holding a watch upon the fight, which had now lasted the better part of an hour.

The fighters grappled, staggered, went down and wallowed in the dirt. Mede knelt on Topaz's groin, kneading it painfully with his knees. Again they were on their feet, Topaz sparring, Mede countering the light blows as best he was able. Mede toppled Topaz again and fell on him, and was flung away. Still again they rose, and clinched and swayed, Mede's weight falling on the other's shoulders, while Mede pommeled his kidneys. The effects of Topaz's powder had worn away, and it was apparent that both were tiring. Topaz's victory was foregone, but Mede must fight until he was unable to move or until his master took him out. The contest went on, slow, labored. The men rolled on the ground, each trying to shake the other off; then they rose and each endeavored to parry the blows of the other. Again they were on the ground. Over and over they rolled and pommeled each other until they reached the edge of the ring where the Alcorn boy squatted, and was forced to inch back to avoid them. Alcorn, in his resentment, kicked at them and caught Mede in the ribs. The fighters struggled again to their feet, slowly, laboriously. Both heaved for breath, panted, sweat, and bled. A dozen times they rose and clinched and fell and wallowed about the arena. The victory was conclusive but not concluded.

Mede came clumsily to his knees, and Topaz gained his feet but only momentarily for Mede hurtled forward and brought him down. They rolled again on the ground in the direction of Maxwell's chair, which he pushed back by a scant half foot to be out of their way. Topaz was on top, Mede supine. So, they paused and panted. They lay one on the other, exhausted. The blood on Mede's back had caked with dirt and dried, but it continued to seep from the cuts and abrasions on his face and to mingle with his sweat before falling to his body or to the ground. Tired, too tired to struggle, they lay one on the other, Mede's arms clasped tightly around Topaz's waist. They lay quietly, with an occasional tremor of energy through Topaz's muscles. Topaz's head extended above Mede's, and it seemed that he was smothering Mede against his shoulder. It was nearing the end. Even the spectators were exhausted with the heat and the tension of the fray. The sun, however, was growing lower in the sky.

No use to prolong this quietude. Topaz had won. It was undeniable. Pearl entered the ring to kick him off his opponent and award him the victory. As he made his way across the arena, there was a gurgling cry from one of the Negroes, and a convulsion of Topaz's shoulders which ran down his back and body. His legs twitched and writhed. With a promise of further action, Pearl retreated from the ring and waited. The convulsion stopped and the Negroes lay still in their embrace.

Seconds, a minute sped by and still they lay. Pearl again started across the ring. Redfield looked at the ground and saw blood, a pool of blood, lying

on the ground at Mede's shoulder, before it should sink into the dust. The pool grew and spread. The body of Topaz twitched again, his leg jerked crazily. Pearl reached the place where the fighters lay and reached down to dislodge Topaz from on top of his victim. Topaz was limp and inert. Pearl turned him over. Blood flowed from his neck upon his shoulders. Topaz, Pearl saw, was dead.

Relieved of his burden, Mede moved to rise, but sank back in the dust. He was able to draw up one knee and flex the leg. His mouth and teeth were stained with blood which had smeared his cheek. He had gnawed his way into Topaz's neck and severed the jugular vein. A gross mouthful of bloody flesh lay on the ground where Mede had spat it. Pearl kicked Topaz aside and helped Mede to rise to sitting, but he fell backward upon the ground.

Hammond rushed forward, amazed at his victory. Pearl raised his hand to announce his decision and to tell the crowd that there would be more fights the following Saturday, but nobody listened. Some men gathered about the corpse of Topaz. More sauntered toward the bar. The excitement was over. Holden brought a bucket of water and dashed it over Mede. It refreshed him and he sat upright, but was unable to rise. The water, mingled with blood and sweat and dust, dripped from his battered face.

Neri came and bent over Topaz to see what had killed him. Satisfied, he shrugged and spurned the wretched body with his boot.

Hammond and Redfield, one on either side of Mede, helped him to rise unsteadily to his feet. They led him into the tavern, where his clothes were. He sank to the floor where Hammond struggled with him to get his legs into his pantaloons, while Redfield went to the bar to requisition a cup of whiskey for the Negro.

Hammond took the cup and held it to Mede's mouth. "Drink it down," he commanded. "Whure you hurtin'?" he asked.

"I tired, I jest tired," said Mede, and tried to smile, but only succeeded in distorting his puffed face.

"We won. We won the fight. We killed that nigger," Hammond told him, not sure that Mede was aware of his victory.

"Yes, suh, Masta, suh," Mede acknowledged the information. "Take me home, please, suh. I wants old Luce."

Hammond helped him again to rise and with the aid of Redfield, supported him slowly across the road to the surrey. Boosting him into the rear seat, Hammond told Star and Kit to get into the front seat, to sit quietly and not to disturb Mede. The exhausted giant fell obliquely across the cushions of the seat and closed his eyes.

Stragglers were leaving the tavern. Returning across the road, Hammond met Alonzo Kyle and Asa Gore coming out. They stopped to slap Hammond's shoulder in congratulation of his triumph but refused to return with him for a drink in celebration. Gasaway had helped Maxwell back into the tavern and Holden had carried the chair in which Maxwell again sat slurping a toddy.

Pearl paid off the bets, and each of the winners bought a round of drinks for everybody. Hammond drew down his three thousand dollars, counted it carefully, folded the currency and stuffed it all, paper and gold together, into his pouch. Brownlee took back the two thousand dollars he had deposited for purchase of the twins, neither a winner nor a loser but disconsolate about his failure to obtain the twin mulattoes. He left the room hurriedly. Neri had already gone. Alcorn and his boy remained, the father giving the son a sip from his glass at each round of drinks, and permitting him to keep the copper coins, despite that they were rightfully forfeit. This was a celebration.

"I knowin' all along your nigger goin' to beat, Mista Maxwell. I jest knowed it. I winnin' five dollars on him my own self," Alcorn bragged, saying nothing of the five he had lost.

"It was narrow, a near thing," Maxwell sighed with satisfaction. "Bad, though, bad, the Mandingo a-killin' him. He gittin' old though, most wore out. Not good fer much any more."

"Ourn ain't neither, seem like," said Hammond. "He petered."

"May have to stuff him fer the fireplace yet, Doc Redfield. We save him an' he croak."

"He ain't hurt none—jest pounded," said the veterinarian. "No bones busted, no innards squshed. Ready, come Saturday, to fight agin."

"No use," said Lewis. "Cain't find nobody now wantin' to fight him. Don't reckon there never goin' to be."

"You know, I reckoned yourn the dead one," rehashed Pearl, leaning his elbows on the counter, "till I see the yaller one kickin' like a neck-wrung rooster. Then I knowed. How you reckon he chaw into his neck that a-way?"

"Whut you goin' to do with it—bury it?" Gasaway inquired.

"Reckon I got to, if Mista Neri don't," shrugged Pearl. "He'll stink quick this weather." Pearl was not perturbed by the chore, however. The day had been profitable.

Maxwell eased himself up from his chair. "Well, Ham," he expressed his readiness to depart. The subject of the fight was for the nonce exhausted, although its details would be rehashed for weeks to come.

The whole party escorted the Maxwells across the road. Mede lolled clear across the rear seat of the surrey, and Hammond placed the two younger boys on the floor at his feet, squatting.

"How you come on, Star? Remember me?" inquired Lewis Gasaway, grasping the black boy's ankle.

"Yas, suh, Masta, suh, Masta Lewis," Star grinned, his lips turning outward, displaying his molars. "I Masta Ham'd Maxwell's nigger now. We eatin' an' eatin'. I goin' to pick cotton when it busts."

"That right purty yaller," commented Redfield. "You wouldn't sell, I reckon."

Hammond shook his head, "Not till he grow some. Cook's tamin' him fer in the house."

"Swim that big lummox tomorrer," Redfield suggested. "Work out that stiffness."

"Salt him, salt him down in hot brine. Draw the fever an' take down the swellin'," Maxwell prescribed more drastically, climbing to his seat, Gasaway's hand steadying his arm.

Pearl pressed forward to shake Maxwell's hand and to thank him for coming. Maxwell was not an old man but his infirmity and solvency made him venerable. His presence had lent prestige to the tavern and to the sport it offered. Pearl could well be grateful. "You all come back again; come often, suh. Be more fightin', come Sat'day."

Hammond said little as he bade good-bye around. He was tired, insufferably tired; it seemed to him he was as tired as Mede, as he mounted to the seat and took the reins. Even the mares were tired of standing in the heat and switching flies, but they turned with a will toward Falconhurst and supper.

CHAPTER 31

MAXWELL massaged the swollen joints of one hand with the palm of the other. He, too, was tired and hungry and satisfied, pleased with the day. He had expected to tire. The sun was dropping behind a bank of rosy cumulus, and a breeze was fanning. Maxwell scanned his son. How handsome he was in the older man's eyes. How proud it made him to sit beside this betterment of his own flesh, leavened with Hammond blood. What a figure he made, sitting. For the boy's unsoundness, his stiff knee, he took the onus himself. That gelded pony!

Hammond had singularly little to say, few comments about Mede's triumph. His father was satisfied just to sit beside such a paragon of a son, reliving in him his long ago blighted ambitions. Ham's silence was provoked by a queasiness, a weakness, a languor not altogether pleasant, a growing tremulousness of his hands upon the reins. Perhaps he had drunk too much whiskey at the tavern. It would pass. He could compare his feeling only to that after his flogging of Memnon.

But it did not pass. It grew. His father failed to note the pallor of his face. Despite the humid warmth of the late afternoon, a kind of momentary chill ran through his body. The mares required little guidance; they trotted homeward at a smart clip. Mede groaned in his somnolence. Kit readjusted himself to a position flat on the floor which would permit his legs to swing from the side of the carriage. Maxwell looked back and warned him not to catch his feet in the spokes of the turning wheel.

Hammond felt himself fainting, but he did not faint, retained his consciousness. His hands shook and he rested them on his knees in his effort to control the tremor. He wanted to vomit but he knew that he could not.

He had felt well when he drove away from the tavern—better than usual, hilarious with victory, exuberant with the day's winnings in his pocket. Not until he was well away from Benson was he aware that anything was amiss, and not until they had passed Amory's woodlot—just about there—did he begin to sicken. It was two miles later that he passed the right rein into his left hand and murmured, "You got to take 'em."

"Whut?" asked Maxwell.

"These lines. I cain't drive no more."

"Why, Son, you sick. You right white. You shakin' like the ager," declared Maxwell, frightened and horrified, as he grasped the reins, winding them for security about his crippled hands.

"I goin' to be all right. I'll take 'em back in a minute—soon as I kin. Don't hurt your hands. Reckon you got the stren'th?"

"They go. Don't need no drivin', jest hold the line," the older man assured the boy, between his gritted teeth. "We'll git home; ain't fur. Whut reckon ails you?"

"Don' know. Jest feel sinkin' like," breathed the young man weakly. "I be all right direc'ly." He braced his back against the back of the seat and inhaled deeply.

"Day too much fer you. You fretted, fretted 'bout the Mandingo. Ain't maimed much. He come all right in a day or two."

Hammond denied his anxiety about Mede. "I wishin' we never risked Meg and Alph, though," he added.

"Why? Good price fer 'em. A thousand apiece, fer jest saplin's. Ain't worth it. An' besides, we never lost 'em."

"But we promised Lucretia Borgia, an' then went an' chanced 'em."

"She ain't a-goin' to know. We never lost 'em," the father reiterated. "It's your mamma in you—too tender livered." His reproof was tempered with approbation.

" 'Sides I fancies 'em, them two, kind of. With them gone, it wouldn't be the same-like." The terror in his tone gainsaid the casualness of his words. Here lay the rub. Hammond valued the twins more than he had been aware; the canceled hazard of losing them had begotten nausea and chill. The father's insight into the cause did not mitigate his solicitude for his son's malady.

"Ain't no danger now. It all over," Maxwell sought to soothe Hammond's anxiety. "We keepin' 'em in. We ain't goin' to sell 'em," he promised vainly.

A shiver descended Hammond's spine, but he sat forward. "I'll take the hosses, now," he offered. "I reckon I kin drive."

"Nev' mind. I doin' all right, right well. My han's don't hurt me," Maxwell dissembled and fell silent. Ahead, he saw a woman in a Mother Hubbard dress disappear in the brush beside the road. The spot was far removed from any habitation and Maxwell wondered briefly what she might be doing. He did not mention her to Hammond, whose eyes were closed, although his father was sure he was not asleep.

He had forgotten the woman as he approached the spot where she had disappeared. Abruptly a Mother Hubbard sprang from the side of the road and grabbed the head of the horses, stopping them. The wearer was masked by a red handkerchief tied over the lower part of his face. Another masked man in Mother Hubbard approached the carriage with a cocked gun.

"Raise your hands," commanded the second man. "Drop the hosses an' raise your hands. We want your money. Don't want to haf to shoot."

The man in front of the horses did not speak.

The Maxwells were unarmed and unable to resist. Bewildered by the suddenness of the unanticipated danger, the older man unwound the reins from his hands and elevated his arms. "Don't fight 'em. Do like he say," he adjured his son. "On'y wantin' jest money."

There was no alternative for Hammond, with the point of the highwayman's gun in his ribs. He too, half comprehending, slowly raised his hands.

Mede roused himself and made as if to rise at which his older master turned his head and ordered, "Don't do nothin'. Set you still."

Kit bgan to cry. Star squatted further down upon the floor, ducked his head and averted his eyes.

"Whure is your poke?" demanded the robber. Hammond lowered his right hand to withdraw it, and the robber cautioned him, "Keep 'em high. Tell me. I'll git it."

"In my pocket," murmured Hammond reluctantly and weakly.

The robber felt him over, located the purse and withdrew it. Holding it before him, he backed toward the overgrown forest at the roadside. "Drop the hosses and leave 'em go," he called to his companion.

"Ought to cut his harness, loose the hosses, and let 'em walk," replied the other.

"Let 'em ride. One is old," said the man with the gun. "Come on." He disappeared into the brush. His partner relinquished the horses and followed.

The robbery had been almost casual, entirely lacking in melodrama. The highwaymen had appeared, made their demands, garnered the money, and departed as suddenly as they had come. It would be as futile to pursue them as it would have been to resist.

"Turn 'round. Go back. Go back fer help," Hammond urged.

"You think they goin' to the tavern to spen' that money?" Maxwell demanded calmly. "They half toward New Orleans already."

"Neri?" suggested Hammond.

Maxwell nodded, as he readjusted the reins about his hands. "An' the other one, the one at the hosses, Brownlee, or I miss. 'Bout his size. They in cahoots all along." He clucked to his mares.

"They could taken the niggers an' the hosses. We couldn't a-done nothin'."

"Didn't want 'em on they hands. That's hangin'." The older man paused and then chuckled, "Look comical in them dresses an' them kerchiefs over they heads. Reckon they reckoned we ain't a-goin' to know 'em."

"We don't—not fer sure."

"We knows, but cain't swear, cain't take oath."

"All that money," lamented Hammond.

"Five hunert dollars, ain't it?"

"Three thousand."

"But on'y five hunert out. The other we won from 'em. They jest a-takin' it back. Jest one half-grown nigger worse off than when we started—'bout that. It ain't bad."

" 'Tain't fair," said Hammond.

"Nigger fightin'. Got to expect it—anything." Maxwell did not condemn the sport. He merely noted its hazards. "Don't tell nobody how we was bilked —'ceptin', maybe, Doc Redfield. Nobody needin' to know. Neri an' Brownlee ain't a-tellin'. We eatin', jest the same."

"An' we got the twins," Hammond groped for consolation. The encounter had rallied his strength. The weakness he had forgotten now returned. A clammy sweat drenched his body and chills followed one after another down

his backbone. He steadied his hands upon his knees to keep them from trembling and gritted his teeth that they might not chatter. He made a futile effort not to consider his loss. At least to balance it against his opponent's loss of his fighter. After all, his man had been the victor, and he still had him, he was still alive, only moderately injured. Best of all was the twins. So he attempted to reason.

Maxwell gave the mares their heads, and they required little guidance or urging, but the strain upon his flaccid arms was racking. He sought to conceal his discomfort from Hammond and succeeded; the son was, in any event, too sick to drive and it devolved upon the father to bring them home. They rolled through the waning daylight in a silence broken by each only by an occasional question of concern as to how the other did.

"I gotten us here," observed Maxwell as the team turned from the road into the lane at Falconhurst.

Napoleon ambled forth to grasp the horses. Star and Kit leaped from the surrey without prompting. Lucretia Borgia appeared on the gallery.

"Whure Memnon?" the owner demanded.

"He comin', Masta, suh."

"Tell him hurry. Hammond here sick."

Lucretia Borgia rushed impetuously forward in her solicitude. Memnon came up to help his master down from the surrey and was cursed for his pains. "Git aroun' to other side. God damn slothin' fool. Lift down your young masta. Lift him careful. He sick."

Before Memnon could pass around the vehicle, however, Lucretia Borgia had grasped Hammond and had lifted him from his seat, stood him upright, supported him with her vast arm around his waist, and was leading him toward the house.

Memnon recircled the surrey, but again before he could reach the other side, his master had crawled down under his own power and was stretching his muscles and flexing his hands. He was fatigued; but his sense of accomplishment, the realization that he was still good for something, his own vigor in comparison with his son's frailty, the need for him to take command banished his weakness and caused him to forget his pain.

"Git him abed," he instructed nobody in particular. "Heat him up a sadiron fer his feet. Cain't you see he sick?"

Lucretia Borgia required no instructions. She was taking Hammond into the house as fast as he was able to walk. Appalled as she was by her young master's condition, she yet enjoyed the opportunity to dominate him that his weakness and irresolution gave her. Again he was a frail and petulant little boy, whom she could at once master and serve, command while she pampered.

"Whure Meg? An' Alph?" Hammond demanded.

"They eatin', Masta, suh. Feedin' 'em, 'thout waitin' fer you all—gittin' so late."

"Call 'em here. I craves seein' 'em, jest seein' 'em," murmured Hammond weakly, pausing at the edge of the gallery.

Lucretia Borgia bellowed their names. "Come here to yo' masta," she roared sternly, as if to indict the twins of some negligence. "Why you wantin' them, Masta? They done somethin'?" she asked.

"They all right? I near to sold 'em, both of 'em," he confessed. "I don' want to sell 'em. They mine."

Lucretia Borgia failed to evince perturbation. "They fetch good money, I reckon, suh," was her comment. They had not been sold; the danger had passed. Why question a white man's right to dispose of his property?

The twins appeared and asked in unison, "Yas, suh, Masta?"

"Meg wipe that egg offn yo' mouth," commanded their mother. "You knows better 'an smear yo' face."

Hammond gestured the boys nearer. He wanted to touch them. He placed his hands on their shoulders and drew them toward him. With the heel of his palm he erased the residue of egg yolk from Meg's face, which the boy had failed to remove with his own hand, and in turn wiped the soil on Alph's shirt. It was enough. He had confirmed with his senses that the slaves had not vanished into thin air.

Meg, without prompting, fell in on one side of his master to lead him. Only after Hammond had satisfied himself of the presence of the twins did he bethink him of Mede. He turned and called to him. "Git down outn that seat," he commanded. "Have Lucy wash you down and rub you good. You all right, come mornin'."

The Mandingo roused himself and tried to obey, but in dismounting from the carriage, sank to his knees between the wheels.

"Run fer Lucy," Hammond told Alph. "Hurry!"

"Nev' mind," said the father. "You go on. Git you abed. I'll see Lucy puts him away."

But Hammond tarried, supported by Meg and Lucretia Borgia, until Lucy arrived, terrified and convulsed with anxiety, followed placidly by Big Pearl.

"Ain't it a pity, ain't it a pity?" repeated Lucy over and over as she helped Mede to rise to his feet. "Whut they do to you? Whut happen?" she demanded.

"We won. I kilt him," Mede murmured the only explanation he could give.

"Wash him down good an' rub him in bed," Hammond prescribed. "I'll send some sleepin' medicine fer him."

"You looks so funny. Sho' do look funny," commented Big Pearl as she and her mother, one on each side, dragged the Mandingo to his feet and supported him toward their cabin.

Hammond watched them go and reluctantly turned to be led himself into the house and up the stairs to his bedroom. He sank back upon the bed and submitted to be divested of his clothes. Maxwell and Memnon followed, and Ellen came, panicked by her apprehension. All, in their anxiety to be of serv-

ice, were in the way of each. Meg and Lucretia Borgia disputed the prerogative of removing their master's clothes. Lucretia Borgia paused in the process to maul her son over the ears and face, which failed to deter him from his determined task. They soon had their master naked and sunk recumbent in the feather-bed after which they swathed him to the neck with quilts. The evening was still warm, but Hammond shivered in the comfort, the luxury, of the enveloping down.

Not until he was in bed did he inquire, "Whure Blanche? Whure your mist'ess?"

"She tired. She went up early," Lucretia Borgia equivocated.

"She drunken again?" he demanded; and, without waiting for an answer, added, "I tol' you not to give her none."

"Yas, suh, Masta, I knows," Lucretia Borgia admitted. "But she gittin' it her own self. I cain't balk no white lady of whut she do. No, suh."

The mores were rigid upon the subject. Hammond made no reply.

Maxwell had left the room but shortly returned with a draught in a goblet. "Drink this down," he admonished. "Won't hurt none. Jest a little laudanum an' water. Drink it down."

Hammond gulped the dose. "Mean to send some of that to Mede, too. Whut he needin' to ease him, make him sleep. Laudanum; see he git a big swallow."

The father promised.

"Chicken soup, that whut Masta needin'," observed the cook. "I'll wring an' pick an' boil one; jest take a minute. Cain't have no real supper, but," turning to Maxwell, "yourn is ready—gittin' col', suh." She went out the door and down the stairs, followed by Maxwell and Memnon, leaving the patient in the care of Ellen and Meg.

Nurses more devoted could not have been found, although there was nothing for them to do. Hammond turned and snuggled himself in his bed. He reached his hand from beneath the covers and drew Meg to the side of the bed, permitting his hand to rest on the boy's thigh. Sure of his possession, he closed his eyes. Meg could not escape, might not even fidget, lest he wake or disturb his master. He was elated at the distinction of his master's touch, grinned in his triumph over Ellen in being chosen. He was not aware by how narrow a squeak he had escaped selling, nor that his master's ailment was but the qualm he now experienced for the jeopardy of Lucretia Borgia's twin boys. It would have chastened Meg to know with what equanimity Hammond hazarded his carcass upon a brawl. He stood beside the bed, fearful to quaver.

Lucretia Borgia brought the steaming bowl of chicken broth she had promised, but the patient was asleep and she took it back to the kitchen to keep it hot until he should awake. Hammond moved in his sleep, withdrawing his hand from the boy, who dropped to the floor with the fatigue of immobility. A mosquito shrilled its strident threat about the room. Ellen followed it with her ears but was unable to see it. At length she picked up a fan and,

waving it with gentle caution, protected the sick face from its assault.

She saw that the face was flushed. The hair was damp with sweat as it fell backward from the brow, and tiny beads of moisture stood on the forehead. The sire, as by some forlorn compulsion, periodically entered the room, stood above the bed, and retreated in a baffled frustration of his eagerness to help. That was the worst of it, there was nothing to be done. Ellen saw nothing funny in the old man's efforts to tiptoe, but she wished he would not come because the stairs squeaked under his tread. He had left his supper, unable to swallow food, but found no such difficulty with the toddies which Memnon stirred for him between the visits to Hammond's room. The pattern of moonlight crawled slothfully across the sitting room floor. Maxwell would have no candle. Nor could Lucretia Borgia and Memnon persuade him to go to bed, although he broke his vigil with cat naps from time to time, leaning his head against the high back of his low rocker.

Hammond's sleep was fretful and disturbed. He turned and threshed and sought to throw off his covers, which Ellen readjusted over his body. The night was languorous and no breeze whispered, but Ellen knew her master's hot body must not be exposed to the night air, however warm, however still. Hammond mumbled. Sometimes a word was clear, occasionally a phrase. Once he threw aside the covers, sat upright, and pronounced with vicious rancor, "I say I goin' to sell the god damn basta'ds. They mine an' I sellin' 'em. Nev' min' whut I say, they weanin' now. You ain't suckin' 'em no more. I sell 'em an' he craves 'em." The speech maundered into unintelligible jargon and what sounded like sobs without tears. Ellen grasped his shoulder, eased the troubled body backward, and restored the covers without waking him. He continued to mutter, flung his arm out and slowly and repeatedly rubbed the ball of his thumb lightly against the tips of his fingers.

All night the household was astir, although, once abed and quieted with laudanum, Hammond required no attention. With morning he opened his eyes drowsily and tasted the soup that Lucretia Borgia had kept steaming through the night. He felt no hunger and was unable to drink three spoonfuls, but Lucretia Borgia was repaid for making it. His fever had subsided but had not entirely disappeared. He thrust his legs from the covers and sat on the side of the bed, fell backward across it, enjoyed the play of the air on his feverish flesh. At length he summoned the resolution to rise and, over Ellen's demur, bade Meg to dress him.

"You ought not, Masta. You sick. I goin' to call Old Masta," Ellen threatened.

"Keep on your britches. Ain't any damn wench drivin' me. I got to 'tend to that boy; like is, he hurtin'."

"Mede? He kin come up here," the girl argued.

"Stinkin' up! That oil an' all!" he dismissed the idea.

Still weak, once on his feet he felt better than he had anticipated. He surmounted the dizziness that overtook him at the head of the stairs and res-

olutely hitched his way down them, one step at a time, Meg on his left side to help and balance him. At the foot of the stairs he braced himself, opened the front door and strode into the open. As he moved from the cool shade into the sunshine, which was already growing hot, he shivered again.

"Go on back," he turned sharply on the young slave at his side. "God damn! Has you got to try an' tail after me, ever' step I takin'? You'd reckon I 'longed to you, ruther as you 'longin' to me. You don't leave me be, I goin' to trounce you, trounce you good. Long time you needin' it. Now, go long. Be gone." This tirade was an effort to negate the thing that had sickened him, about which he felt some shame. He refused to credit that his fear of losing the Borgia's twins could have brought on his fever and laid him low. Two useless yellow striplings!

The Negro rolled his eyes toward the speaker and then at the ground. He turned and sulked his way toward the house, glancing from time to time over his shoulder as he went. Meg was secretly glad that Hammond was ill, for it afforded him a chance of being with him on the pretext of ministering to him. Just to be along!

Hammond limped across the area and entered the Mandingo's cabin. Mede lay in the bed, supine, Lucy feeding him his breakfast morsel by morsel with her fingers. His eyes were mere slits between bulging blue-green lids. His cheeks were knobs, his thick lips were everted with swelling, and his nose spread amorphously over his face. Unable to chew without pain, he swallowed the bites of fat pork whole as Lucy stuffed them slowly into his mouth.

"He funny," giggled Big Pearl. "That nigger shore look funny."

"Hush up you big black mouth," Lucy admonished her. "You don't, I makes you look funnier than he do. Cain't you see he painin'? Ain't got no gumption?" In the mother's indignation she turned also on Belshazzar, who was munching his breakfast, and ordered him, "Take that bone you suckin' an' git outn hyar! Cain't you see Masta come? You jist in his way. Be polite, cain't you? Git out. All time swillin' down feed on Masta, and jist stays knobby kneed, an' don't lay on no fat! Reckon it worms eatin' it faster than you stuff it down. Masta goin' to worm you out one day, an' stop you eatin' so much. Ain't you, Masta?"

Lucy's back was toward the boy and she failed to notice that he had disappeared, bone in hand, before she finished her nervous speech, which in any event was designed more to impress the master than to censure the slave. Hammond ignored the household strife.

He walked to the bed and looked down at Mede's upturned face and asked, "How is you, boy? How you come on? Is you hurtin' bad?"

"Naw, suh, Masta, suh. I all right—goin' to be. I right tol'able, suh, please suh," the slave replied thickly and painfully, with a grimace intended to be a smile.

"He near kilt," Lucy put in. "He don' got to fight no more, Masta, do he? Mede near ruint."

"Whut you reckon I got him fer, jest to pleasure you an' Big Pearl? Other bucks good enough fer that. When he well agin, I'm goin' to fight him when I tell him. Mede craves to fight, don' you?"

The slits of eyes turned upward at the outer corners in an implied smile, as the boy bobbed his jaw in an effort to nod his head.

"He kill that othern. He tell you?" Hammond praised Mede, who grinned broadly despite the pain.

Lucy answered with an "Umm! Umm!"

Hammond bent over the bed and prodded the tender flesh of the eyelids with his forefinger, spread them back to examine the eye itself. He pinched the bulged cheeks tentatively, felt of the lips, opened the mouth to examine the teeth. None was missing or broken. He grasped the nose and tried in vain to remold it.

"That hurt you?" he asked.

Mede's answering grunt, neither affirmative nor negative, was a reluctance to admit his pain.

When Hammond cast back the covers to examine Mede's body, the stench of serpent oil suffused the room. The torso was swollen in spots and Mede flinched at Hammond's prodding of them. Turned on his belly, the Mandingo cried out with pain he could not disguise when Hammond pommeled him in exploration over the small of the back. But worst of all was the knee when Hammond tried to flex it.

"Please, suh, Masta, suh," Mede begged while his master manipulated the joint, which only prompted him to bend and twist it the harder. Sweat stood on the black brow as Mede endured the torture.

"I better sen' fer Redfield," Hammond opined aloud. "He goin' to fire that knee an' make it bend."

"No, no, please, suh, Masta, not that white man. He goin' to hurt, hurt bad. It git well, Masta. I kin ben' it now, almos'. You do sompin', anything, but not him."

"Don' want a stiff knee, do you, like I got?" It was the worst fate that Hammond could suggest. "That red poker jist take a jiffy; Doc Redfield kin fix it."

Mede sat up in bed, weeping. "Naw, naw, no," he cried. "Please Masta, suh, don' let him burn me." He grasped Hammond about the shoulders, and buried his face in his coat, tears of terror streaming from his face.

The white youth hugged the Negro to him and let him cry. "Doc ain't a-goin' to hurt you none more than he got to. Won't take more than a minute. I wish they done it to me," Ham tried to appease his black child. "Course, it leave an ugly spot; you won't strip down so purty, but it won't hender you none an' I wantin' to fight you."

Mede clung but the tighter to Hammond's body, racked with convulsive sobs. Fearful not at all of the worst such an opponent as he had fought yesterday was able to do to him, he quailed at the concept of a hot poker in

the hands of the veterinary.

Hammond, moved to compassion, perhaps by the analogy of the Negro's affliction to his own, suffered Mede to snuggle against him. "I tellin' you whut!" he soothed. "You knows that Boadicea. She fat an' purty; and she ready fer another sucker. You good an' hol' still an' don' holler, I give 'Cea to you fer pleasurin', all you wants until you knocks her. Won't that be nice?"

In no condition nor in any mood for dalliance, that his master should condescend to wheedle with him prompted the Mandingo to nod his acceptance of the terms. Hammond was unable to see the nod but only felt the movement of the face buried against his chest. As he stroked the back of the naked boy in his arms, his fingers encountered the scab-incrusted rips in the skin from the rake of Topaz's nails.

If Hammond had believed it best to use the cautery on the knee, he would have used it, with or without Mede's acquiescence, and Mede knew it. What he did not know was that father and son had resolved that Boadicea should have a child by Mede. The barter between master and slave was only make-believe, with the master profiting from both terms of the barter.

The white nostrils were by now inured to the fetor of the serpent oil, and Hammond continued to sit on the side of the bed with the lubber torso of the big Negro tenderly cradled in his arms. So he sat when a shadow from the door subdued the light and he raised his eyes to encounter Doc Redfield, escorted by the elder Maxwell.

"Well, ain't this a good pinch!" Hammond greeted the veterinarian. "I was jes' about to sen'."

"Is he bad?" demanded the father. "Don' you fret; makin' an omelet, got to break eggs."

"Not bad, on'y his knee. I wants Doc, here, to fire it. Else, it goin' stiff—like mine."

"Take here," the veterinarian assumed charge of the case, grasping Hammond's arm and aiding him to rise. "Let me see it."

Mede sprawled back upon the bed; and when Redfield saw the mangled face, he broke into laughter. "His head look like a squshed punkin," he chuckled. "Reckon you ain't a-goin' to show him off no more. Would scare a sow into slippin' her farrow. Let's see."

He prodded and pinched the bruised and swollen features, and turned to the owners. "Ain't no gatherin' yet, as I kin find. Don' need no cuttin' to let out the matter. It will go down, an' straighten aroun', course of time. Course, mayhap the nose goin' to be whoppered, but he don' fight nor fornicate nor pick cotton with his nose."

"My niggers all soun'," Maxwell objected. "I don't like no eyesores aroun', spoilin' the looks of the rest."

"Look at the knee jint, Doc. That whut frettin' me," Hammond interposed impatiently. "Reckon firin' goin' to fix it?"

The doctor slipped his hands down the body, stopping on the way to press

sore ribs and punch the bruised belly. He nodded his satisfaction that the contusions were not deep. He handled and pinched the genitals. "This son-a-bitch sure hung heavy. Not hurt at all. Good as new."

"The knee," Hammond insisted.

Redfield lifted the right leg first, and Hammond prompted him that the injury was to the other. Mede groaned when the veterinarian took hold of it, not from pain but from fear, envisioning the burning iron. The doctor flexed the joint and twisted the lower leg. He felt and pinched and pommeled. He turned Mede upon his belly and bent the knee backward until the heel kicked the buttock. The Negro writhed and sweat but did not cry out. Told to bend the knee without aid, Mede tried but could move the lower leg only in the shortest of arcs. The doctor forced it back again and again against the thigh.

"Course, I kin fire it, if you craves me to," he issued his verdict, standing erect. "Hurry it up some, but I reckon it ain't needful. It jest a wrick. Him workin' it a-goin' to loose it up—havin' the big wench work it." He nodded toward Lucy.

"That goin' to agony him," protested the woman.

"Then we burn him," threatened the doctor.

"Lucy do it, an' I tellin' her," said Hammond confidently, relieved of his anxiety.

"Course, an' it go stiff we kin fire it any time," Redfield shrugged.

"Kin you fire my leg an' fix it right?" demanded Hammond with a light of hope in his glance.

"I reckon you too late," the veterinary canceled the hope. "Course, I ain't no white-doctor. I on'y a horse-doctor, but not even no big New Orleans regular doctor goin' to unstiffen your leg."

"Ain't nobody goin' to monkey with it," muttered the father unsurely, removing the quid from his mouth. As he walked to the door to throw the tobacco away, he hissed under his breath something about a "crazy damn pony!"

Hammond turned to Lucy to give her final instructions about manipulation of Mede's knee, and Redfield interposed the caution, "Work it, work it hard. Painin' don' count, never mind ifn you be his dam."

"Shu-u," Hammond quieted the doctor with a shake of his head.

"Too late now. Not hurtin' nothin' that she know. She in foal to him and cain't he'p it now," the elder Maxwell made the best of Redfield's lapse.

To Lucy it was white man's talk, and she made no effort to understand it, despite that it pertained to something about her and Mede.

Except for Lucretia Borgia's chicken broth, served to him in his bed, Hammond had eaten no breakfast. In his concern for Mede, he had forgotten it. His fever had disappeared, but he felt a lassitude as the three white men strolled toward the house. He saw Tiger at play with other children in front of Sukey's cabin and stopped to gather the boy in his arms.

"It Ham's first," explained the father with pride.

"A right pert saplin', seem like," conceded Redfield, "but not no Mandingo."

"Not cravin' he be no Mandingo," Hammond bridled. "I aim to make him a house nigger." He kissed the squirming boy and set him down.

Blanche, avoiding her husband's censure for her yesterday's bibbing, kept her room. She reserved to herself the excuses that the day was hot, she did not wish to get into tight clothes for Redfield's presence, and her pregnancy, as she thought, was beginning to be evident. At once she resented that her husband failed to come to her room and rejoiced that he did not upbraid her for yesterday's drinking. He did not in fact ignore the behavior, but scorned to mention it.

The toddies that Meg had ready for the men when they entered the house cheered them and restored the young man's sense of strength. He swallowed two of them, which Meg had prepared with a formidable quantity of liquor. They loosened his tongue to tell Redfield of the robbery.

Redfield rose in wrath. "Let's ride," he proposed. "We kin ketch 'em an' shoot it out."

"Keep on your britches, Doc," the older Maxwell cautioned. "They nigh in Natchez by this time, an' we not sure who they be, anyways. I ain't goin' to have Hammon' shot 'cause of a few dollars."

"Three thousan'!" protested Redfield.

"Which we won, most of it. We not out much. We kilt their nigger." Maxwell was complacent in his triumph.

"Leastwise, we kept the twins," Hammond consoled himself.

"An' we still goin' to eat," said Maxwell, standing up in heed of Memnon's dinner bell.

"We carryin' 'em to New Orleans this autumn, you better start they primin'," counseled Redfield after dinner, as he emerged from the dining room. Nothing had been said about the excursion to which he looked forward as an escape from domesticity and as an occasion for he knew not what kind of errantry.

"We ain't yet awhile culled 'em out," declared Hammond.

"They all fat, right plump-like," sighed the old man complacently sinking in his chair. "All they needin' is a few weeks of white vittles an' a little hardenin'."

"You crave them wenches to show come October, better turn the bucks to 'em now. Buyers ain't takin' a trader's word that a breeder is knocked," Redfield urged in his anticipation of the journey.

"An' Doc got the time, we go over 'em today an' decide—make up the coffle," Hammond proposed.

"The wenches, I already knows—Fanny, Floridy, an' Sheby, mayhap Twinkle."

Hammond flinched inwardly at the name of each woman his father mentioned. "Not Sheby?" he asked. "She young yet."

"Ain't old, but her last one come one leg first an' never strong, an' her one before foaled dead. She already pregnant an' be showin' good time you start; Floridy too. 'Poleon, she say, but Vulc help I reckon. They all run after Pole, but Pole ain't fruitful."

"Pole goin', I guess?" asked Hammond.

"An' Vulc. No use Doc lookin' them over."

"Vulc countin' on it, but I kind of cleave to him, don' relish him a-goin'."

"Ham would keep 'em all, feed 'em an' cod 'em an' wheedle 'em an' dry nurse 'em till they die off, ever' one of 'em. Sophy was like that too." The father's complaint was praise. "Better sell 'em, the bucks 'special', afore they old enough to ack vicious."

Redfield concurred. "Bucks is like bulls," he said; "easy to overbear 'till'n they growed an' after that you better keep a pitchfork handy."

"All 'ceptin' Mandingos; they never git outn han', always they stays biddable, long as they live."

"An' Gaboons don' stir up no mess, neither," ventured Redfield.

"Who cravin' Gaboons? Ain't got gumption to rise agin you. Worst niggers they is," Maxwell spat at the dead fireplace. "Hammond fetch home one with Gaboon blood in it, I goin' to stick a knife in it an' let it out."

"Ibos worst," Hammond interposed to demonstrate his ethnic knowledge. "They sticks a knife in they own self—either that or they hangs."

"Kromantees worst of all," Redfield pursued the issue. "Snake a Kromantee a little an' he goin' to kill you first chancet. That Nat Turner a Kromantee, hearin' tell."

"White, most all white, that Turner. White blood makes 'em mean—and smart. No, you all wrong about a Kromantee." Maxwell whittled a chew of tobacco. "A man who cain't manage a Kromantee don't merit havin' one."

"We got any Kromantees, Papa? Course, I knowin' they all mixed now, 'ceptin' them Mandingos."

Maxwell smiled. "What is Lucretia Borgia?" he countered rhetorically. "She a good deal white, but a Kromantee heart."

"But Lucretia Borgia ain't mean—Kromantee an' white?"

"Ain't mean an' she git her way," Maxwell sniffed at Hammond's failure to understand Negroes. "Rile her right good, she carve your liver right out an' eat it raw, strike like a cottonmouth, kill her own twins and strew they guts over Falconhurst. Doc Redfield here, he's right; kid gloves or a pitchfork fer a Kromantee. Ain't no middle way."

"If we goin' to make up that coffle—" Redfield reminded.

Maxwell rose stiffly from his chair. Hammond searched for a blank book of yellow paper of which he tore a page from the back. Unable to find a pencil, he accepted the loan of a stub which Redfield drew from his pocket.

To begin with, Hammond listed the women his father had chosen for sale, "Fanny, Floridy, Sheby—Twinkle." He added, "Polon, Vulkin" as determined upon and not requiring examination. Redfield read over his shoulder

as he wrote and asked, "About that three balled saplin'? Worth more now than later."

"Him too," said Hammond and wrote "Trides" at the bottom of the paper, leaving room for other names above it. "Make me joyful to git shet of that speckled brique."

"Joyful a thousan', twelve hunert dollars," said Redfield.

The three men loitered toward the barn, taking Meg with them to find and summon the slaves as they should be needed. Hammond told the half dozen young Negroes playing hopscotch around the door to be gone and drew up a stool just inside for his father. One by one he sent Meg to fetch the older boys and as they arrived told them to strip for inspection. The doctor went over them for blemishes or signs of unsoundness, criticized one for being thin and recommended treatment for worms, but most he found fat to the point of softness. For them he prescribed harder work.

Four boys that it was planned to sell were rejected as immature and it was decided to hold them another year. "More growin' in 'em," pronounced the elder Maxwell, upon whose opinion the final choice rested. "Nex' year we goin' to have a likely lot. Reckon another year's feedin' four not bust us."

One stalwart youth with brilliant black skin, Adam by name, was disconsolate at being examined. "You goin' to sell me, Masta, suh?" he asked.

"Sellin' you an' I wants," Hammond replied. "Now step an' show yo' self; show how good you made. I thinkin' you all crave sellin'."

Adam stood on one foot and shrugged his naked shoulder. "Not to Masta Doc, I doesn't craves. Me wants to go that big place an' see all them folkses, like you said, Masta, please suh."

"You goin'," Hammond laughed. "Don't you fret. Doc Redfield here isn' buyin' you. He jest a-lookin' at you, see an' ready. You goin' along all right," and Hammond added Adam's name to his list. The black boy was appeased and thenceforth showed himself with alacrity to run and retrieve and demonstrate his fitness.

A stocky yellow boy, stripping during the survey of a virile mulatto, made a show of modesty, shielding his genitals with his hand. Seeing the gesture, Hammond chided him, "Whut ailin' you, Lute? Take down that han'. You ain't no wench!"

Lute complied but tears stood in his eyes. "I ain't hang big like Phrensy there. Don' let him see me. I growin'."

"Nev' min', nev' mind," said Maxwell. "Ain't high enough for no stud, noways."

Meg cast a doubtful glance at his master and ventured, "I bigger'n you is, Lute, a'ready."

The triple slap that followed upon the vaunt had not been unforeseen, but the offense was worth the penalty. He had only asserted a truth. His face wrinkled to cry, but after the first smart he changed to a laugh which he smothered with his hand.

Maxwell, unconcerned with callow lapses, ordered Meg, "Now, boy, scare up that mustee."

"Ace?"

As Meg left the barn, he heard his master say, although it was not intended for his ears, "I reckon that saplin' is bigger, but he don' know whut to do with it."

"That mustee, he ain't much more than a saplin'. You ain't goin' to sell him off yet awhile?" Redfield spoke his surprise.

"Too white. Never like 'em too white."

"Blanche, that is Miz Maxwell, she bein' tellin' Papa that Ace is a conjure. She afeard of him."

"That case—" conceded Redfield.

Meg returned with Ace scowling behind him. The white boy removed his garment as he was told and submitted to the doctor's inspection, but it was with bad grace. Reproachful, suspicious looks shot from the black eyes toward his masters. His recalcitrance was not overt, but was not disguised. It did not prompt Redfield to leniency; and once Hammond removed the paddle from its nail on the wall, but checked his notion to use it. It was the boy's contumacy, apparent but silent, that deserved chastisement; black thoughts lurked behind the brow, but thoughts could not be purged. Hammond forsaw rebellion and resolved to watch for it.

"This buck skinny," pontificated the vet, squeezing Ace's thigh to ascertain what anybody could see.

"Not worms. Papa purged him good las' week."

"Mayhap, eatin' clay—a dirt eater," Redfield suggested.

"I goin' to bethwack him, I ketches him eatin' it," threatened Hammond. "He ain't goin' to be hongry no more fer dirt."

"An hairy, hairy like a baboon all over. Look a' its legs, shagged like a pard an' still a-tuggin' at its dam's udder. White blood! Hairs grows in white skin," Maxwell shuddered with disgust. "Write him down. Write him down. Git shet. Fat him an' you kin, but git shet anyways."

There were sixteen boys on the sales list and tentatively four women. The veterinarian had relished their examination and the heed the owners paid to his opinion. He scorned compensation for the task which was a preliminary to his junket to New Orleans. Hammond's fever was gone and he felt no weakness now. In the need of managing the plantation, he had forgotten his yesterday's hazard of the twins.

The party returned to the house and drank two rounds of toddies before Redfield decided that he must return to the widow. He resisted Maxwell's pressure that he remain for dinner. Mounted upon his dun gelding, he reiterated his willingness to sign the certificates of character of the slaves to be sold, as required in Louisiana. "Remember," he called. "I knows 'em, knows 'em ever' one, jest like my own. I watched 'em grow an' I kin take my oath they soun' an' without no vice. You have them 'tificates made out an' Banker

Meyer sign 'em. I sign right alongside his name. That the best part of havin' the Widder—I'm a freeholder now."

After Redfield had ridden away, Maxwell commented with amusement, "Doc thinkin' he rich! His name on a paper good as Meyer's!"

"Well, he knowin' our niggers anyways—has fingered 'em," said Hammond.

"Knowin' one clay eater!" the father scoffed. "Meyer won't ast no questions; he will sign."

The meeting house, transformed into a dormitory, had slept the larger boys, but Hammond decided to use it only for the ones in the sales-draft, and to send the others back to the barn. Thus he should be better able to supervise and condition those chosen for sale. He undertook the segregation immediately, gave orders that the floor should be cleaned out and fresh straw scattered for beds. Returning by way of the kitchen, he told Lucretia Borgia to issue to the occupants of the meeting house more meat and molasses and to see to it that each should have a large cup of pot-liquor every day and cautioned her to make them drink it. The chickens were beginning to moult and eggs were few at that season, scarcely more than were needed for the household and for Mede. There would be time enough later to sleeken the sale slaves with raw eggs.

Redfield had found the boys, except Ace and Atrides, to be too fat, which Hammond undertook to remedy not by a reduction of food but by an increase in labor, not by mere leisurely chopping of cotton but by a felling of trees, splitting of rails, and building of unneeded fences. He would keep them together, work them as a gang, harden their muscles. Like eggs, he postponed the employment of serpent oil until he should be ready to finish them off.

His problem with the two gangling younger boys, Ace and Atrides, was to increase rather than to reduce their flesh. But Ace's value, if he had any, was in the whiteness of his skin and Atrides in his additional testicle, and the hardness of their muscles would count less than the roundness of their contours. Nobody would buy them for the labor they could perform but rather for their rarity. For minions they would have brought larger prices if they had been younger, but somebody, probably some sporting men, would want them. Hammond purposed to step up their meat allowance along with the others and to include them with the gang but only as food carriers and water boys. The morale would be better, the enthusiasm for the journey would be increased by keeping the gang together. To be chosen for sale was a distinction which set its members apart from the less fortunate slaves, doomed for at least another year to the routine of their little world of Falconhurst.

When Hammond entered the sitting room, Blanche was there, in a clean blue wrapper, stringy hair pulled tightly back from her brow into a knob on her head, stocking footed. He had not seen her since his departure for Benson the previous morning and he kissed her as perfunctorily as he kissed his father. The only allusion to the girl's indulgence was the pointed refusal

of her husband to join his father in a toddy, of which the older man drank three before supper. Blanche also declined the glass Meg had mixed for her.

In the course of the meal the younger man descanted upon his project to condition the draft to bring the most returns. Blanche was neither hungry nor interested; as soon after supper as she found that her husband's eye was on her and that she was to have no drink, she went to her room.

Maxwell listened for the girl's foot on the creaky stair and remarked, "Luggin' that chil' around, reckon mayhap she need it. Kind of ease her. A little not goin' to hurt her none." It was reproof, but mild, guarded.

"I ain't a-wantin' no sot. He got Falconhurst to run."

"Who you mean?"

"That boy she big with, when he is growed."

The old man felt himself repulsed, if not in his turn reproved. "Oh!" he answered. "Yes." There was some small element of perverse spite in his emptying his glass and his command to Meg to bring him another.

Hammond sat without speaking until the drink arrived, after which he rose and stretched. "I better see how the Mandingo comin' afore I retires, see how Lucy workin' that jint." There was little misgiving about Lucy.

As he left the room he saw the older man lean forward to give Alph, lurking on the floor, a swallow from his goblet, as if sneaking a tid-bit to a hungry puppy.

CHAPTER 32

MONDAY resumed the routine of chopping cotton. Here and there, early as it was in the year, an occasional plant showed an opening boll; it would not be long until picking could begin. The cotton gang was depleted of hoe-hands by the diversion of the older boys to wood-chopping, but the cotton plants were now so large that there was no danger that weeds would overgrow them. There were dwarfed and stunted areas where the soil was lean, but Hammond was satisfied with the prospective crop. The rows were pretty clean and all that was needed now was to keep them clean, which the women and adolescents could easily do.

By Wednesday the swellings on Mede's face and the soreness of the bruises had subsided until his features were recognizable. He had quite recovered his spirits. Best of all, his knee had so mended that he was able to walk without a limp, if not without pain. Hammond instructed Lucy to continue the embrocations and the manipulations.

"Mede cry an beggin' me not to," Lucy tattled. "When I twis' it, he carry on."

"Nev' min'. I say twis' it; bend it and twis' it—hard. Don' give in to no cry-babyin'."

"He ain't, ain't booed, now goin' on three days," said Big Pearl, "I tell him I goin' tell Masta. He don' crave no casta oil."

"He goin' to git it, crave or no crave. Drink it right down; Lucretia Borgia give it to you. I reckon them eggs; they costive. Them an layin' up with no work."

"Yes suh, Masta, suh," the Mandingo acquiesced.

He was too precious to risk in productive work, and, aside from the occasional use of him as a stallion, was wholly unprofitable. Hammond would have scoffed at the aspersion of "fancy" as it might be applied to Mede, but he served no purpose except connoisseurship. This the Negro was not long in surmising and set himself up as a spoiled darling, which he was, the peacock of Falconhurst. Disdainful of the lesser slaves, he was as arrogant as he was exigent with Lucy and Big Pearl. His favors were a condescension and the women to whom they were delegated were expected to be, and were, grateful. He was as abject toward his white owners as he demanded his fellow-slaves to be to him, and he submitted willingly to the most rigorous regimen of exercise and diet that Hammond's ingenuity could devise.

If he believed himself neglected, he would throw himself in his master's path with a plea, "My back hurtin', Masta, suh. Has Miz Lucretia Borgia got somethin' ol' Lucy kin rub on me?" Or, "Masta, suh, my legs gittin' sof' an' fat. Will you look, please suh, an' say me whut I goin' to do?" Once he accosted Hammond with "That Mina wench you givin' me, Masta, suh—I skeared I never got her good las' night. Please, suh, kin I pleasure her again?" Always, he would accuse himself, and his bid for attention was always in his

owner's interest. Hammond could not well ignore a weak back or a flabby leg, however imaginary; and it was as much a boon to Mina as to Mede that he should spend another night in her bed. Hammond was seldom too busy to heed the demands Mede made upon his attention.

That bugbear of the cotton planter, a wet picking season, beset Alabama. Wind and rain and rain alone assailed the opening bolls, which wilted and rotted before they could be gathered. The Maxwells threw their whole force, adults and children, into the "patch" on those rare days dry enough to warrant working, but the pickers were so undiscriminating that much of the sound fiber was mildewed by contact with the soggy bolls included in the bags. Hammond cautioned the hands each morning not to pick wet cotton, but it filled the picking bags as well as the dry. He had the women go through the wagons to sort out and discard as much wet fleece as they were able before the crop was hauled to Benson for ginning. It was futile, since all was dank, if not before it was picked, dampened by the dragging of the jute bags through the mud and puddles of the field.

Would the rain ever stop? The crop had grown and matured well, better than Hammond had anticipated when he had planted it, and he gave the credit to the Petit Gulf variety which was new at Falconhurst. But for Petit Gulf there was a long picking season; the bolls on a plant kept bursting for weeks, a few at a time. And the afternoon downpour or the all-night drizzle blasted them as they burst.

Hammond was irritable in his despondency, ignoring Mede's imaginary miseries, threatening the twins, slapping Tiger when the baby begged to be included in the picking gang. Repentant, he squatted and took the child in his arms, kissed the cheek still livid with the print of his fingers, and gave Tiger the cotton bag he wanted.

"Remember, Tiger, you ain't goin' to be no cotton nigger. You craves to be a house-boy, doesn't you?" the father argued with his yellow son.

"I pick," persisted Tiger.

"Well, pick, but pick clean. Don' ruin it. Quit, you gits ready." Hammond regretted his petulances as soon as they were uttered.

If he was disappointed in the failure of his crop, Lucretia Borgia was desolated. She stood on the gallery, watching the rain descend and shaking her head while she supported her distended abdomen with her hands intertwined beneath it. For all the eupepsia with which pregnancy endowed the woman, she could not abide with complacency misfortunes which beset the family. Especially did her moods mirror those of her younger master.

The elder Maxwell, on the contrary, took a modicum of perverse satisfaction in his son's discomfiture, the satisfaction he had taken when Ham's castle of blocks had toppled and the boy had learned by trial and error to build securely. To Maxwell, the failure of a crop was but a lesson in the futility of planting. "He goin' to learn," he told Blanche over their toddies, "whut I been tellin'. Cain't make cotton on wash-away lan'. Jest some'in' to keep

the niggers from settin' an' rottin'. The harves' is niggers—growin' niggers, regular nigger farm. Cain't learn him, seem like, Falconhurst ain't a cotton plantation at all.

"Course, I know," he conceded, nodding, "cotton genteel. Goin' to be a gen'leman, you got to grow a little patch of cotton. The Hammonds all growed it—an' all busted." Neither rancor nor irony was in his tone.

Lucretia Borgia's child refused to wait for the end of cotton picking, however much its advent discommoded its mother's assumption of the supervision of the activity, superimposed upon her other duties. On her kitchen pallet shortly after midnight in early October an uneasiness assailed the woman which she recognized as the preliminary to her labor. She scrambled to her feet and called Memnon to help her. Rhythmic pains ensued and the intervals between them lessened. Lucretia Borgia strained and relaxed, strained and relaxed. At length she fell back, exhausted, but she knew that it was over. Memnon had caught the child, a girl, he saw, as he severed the cord.

"Masta give you a dolla', I reckon," Memnon commented. "I don' see whyn't he don' give me dolla', too."

Lucretia Borgia reclined on her pallet, clinging to her heart the small organism of which she had just been relieved, gnawing avidly at her breast that had not as yet begun to flow. The woman was weak, languid, but happy in her imagining of the Maxwell enthusiasm. When day broke, she climbed to her feet to get breakfast for the family but was forced to return to her bed and leave the chores to Memnon and Dite.

"Jes' when Masta Ham needin' me!" she lamented. "Pickin' an' ever'thin'."

"You a-knowin' las' winter time it goin' to come aroun' pickin'. Comes of messin' too long with that 'Poleon," Memnon muttered. "Masta ought to knowed he no good."

As the Maxwells sat down to breakfast, Meg came galloping impetuously from the kitchen, peacock brush in hand, and announced, "Masta, please suh, my mammy fetch you a sucker. Come see, please suh, come see." He even laid his hand on his master's arm and sought to draw back his chair.

"Nev' min'," said Hammond. "We seein' it after we eats. She doin' all right? Whut kin' she fetch? On'y one?"

Memnon came with a platter of ham and eggs. "I bringin' you nice sucker, Masta," he claimed credit. "Me an' Lucretia Borgia."

"How know it yourn? She pleasurin' with that Pole, wasn't she? Mayhap hisn!" Maxwell said between bites. "Been two of 'em, I'd reckon it yourn."

"It mine! You see an' it not," Memnon was confident.

"Then you weakin' down some. Why ain't it twins?"

Memnon shrugged.

"Whut kind is it?" Hammond wanted to know.

"It little an' light, light red," explained Meg.

"They all comes light. They blackens," Hammond deigned to explain. "But whut kin'?"

"Jes' a wench, Masta, suh," admitted Mem with reluctance.

"Well, anyways, better look at it, Ham, an' give the wench a dollar, you gits time, after breakfas'."

"Whyn't you? Sun's out and dry. I got to watch after them pickin' hands."

"You know she ruther you, Son; your dollar shines brighter. 'Sides, in my time I've looked at so many, they all lookin' like squirmin' water-dogs. See that it whole, arms an' legs an' all; an' tell Lucretia Borgia somethin' nice. Ain't no rush 'bout her cookin', tell her. Let her lay two, three days an' she a-wantin'."

The weather had taken a turn. Day followed day of fine sunshine obscured only by the blue October haze. Retarded bolls came to maturity and burst wide on the browning plants until the field from a short distance seemed covered with snow. Not only was the harvest copious, but it was easier to gather since each plant carried many ripe bolls. What is more, the cotton was dry. The crop was not a failure after all. Hammond was ardent in his praise of Petit Gulf.

The slaves selected for sale were responding to their increased rations and their strenuous labors. From all except Atrides and Ace the fat had melted and was replaced by vigorous, hard sinew. Even Atrides had rounded somewhat and had lost some of his ungainliness, looked less like a broken jumping jack. His face was still spattered with confluent freckles, his gray eyes still appeared weak and about to flow, his woolly poll was still dirty orange. Ace's stringy flanks refused to fatten, and his black eyes continued to flash reproach.

Hammond added raw eggs to the boys' diets, and set bottles of serpent oil about the dusty window ledges of the meeting house with instructions that each should anoint another and be anointed in turn every night before they should lie down to sleep. The stench of the nostrum was so vile that nobody could doubt its efficacy. The chill of the October evenings to the boys' nakedness nor the fatigue after their day's labor deterred its use, for the massage both sent them warm to bed and rubbed the ache out of exhausted muscles.

"I pick me out a right big, fat, white gen'man an' craves him buy me. Show him how strong I is, say I works good fo' him," planned Lute, on his belly while Saffron rubbed snake oil into his shoulder. "A fat man feeds good, anybody knowin' it."

"Fat mans eats all up theirself. Don' leave nothin' fer they hands," countered Phrensy.

"Me?" Atrides questioned without being asked. "I goin' to fin' me a rich white man whut wants waitin' on. I waits good, stirs his corn, an' all."

Nobody cared about the plans of another.

"I aims to fin' a masta cravin' a stout stud buck," dreamed Phrensy, looking down at himself.

"You too dark fer sech," objected Vulcan, pouring snake oil on his own genitals, while Napoleon massaged his biceps. "You, Phrensy, goin' win' up

in a sugar fiel', cuttin' cane." Vulcan make no declaration of his own aspirations, but he would have none of Phrensy's trespass upon them.

The boys envisioned themselves going up and down the crowded streets of the city in search of masters that suited their taste. With no ideas of what a city might be or what a street was like, each envisioned a concourse of men competing to buy him. Low laughter, contemptuous but good natured, greeted the announcement of each conceit.

They were sobered by Napoleon's warning, "You-all ain't a-goin' to do nothin', savin' Masta say. He goin' to sell you to who he reckon, an' you-all ain't goin' to have nothin' to do with it. Leastwise, me. I doin' whut Masta tells me."

All knew that Napoleon spoke the truth, but it did not forestall their dreams of felicity. All looked ahead to the excursion into the greater world. They considered themselves the aristocrats of the plantation; they had been chosen.

Hammond looked with satisfaction upon the strong and strengthening bodies and fed them tales of New Orleans that intensified their desires. He half-believed his inventions. In his own interest, he envisioned easy sales at high prices, and intended to dispose of these boys to none but gentlemen, masters who would treat them well. It was a fine assortment, just on the brink of maximum development, the edge of youth still on their features, the lustihood of maturity in their thews. Just ripe. His father had taught him to choose the exact time when a slave was likely to bring the largest price.

Only by comparison with Mede did the members of the sales-draft seem jejune. Watching him exercise, bending, squatting, jumping, lifting, Hammond felt that he was sacrificing nothing in disposing of the other boys. The Mandingo alone could replenish the plantation. Memnon was in reserve, but to cut the ring with which he was infibulated and to have it re-soldered was a nuisance.

Some two weeks after the birth of Lucretia Borgia's baby, Dite was beset with labor. She was promptly put to bed and Ellen hovered over her. The child was Hammond's own and no chances were to be taken with amateur obstetrics. Vulcan, who knew the countryside, was put on a mule and sent to fetch the Widow Johnson. (Redfield continued to refer to his wife as "the Widder," and as the Widow Johnson she remained in the minds of the Maxwells.)

That lady arrived driving the same big, heavy footed, gray mare hitched to the same vehicle in which she had driven on her professional errands since long before she was married to her former husband, a kind of rattletrap calash with the hood thrown back (nobody had ever seen it up), lop-sided from her heavy occupancy of the left seat. The front wheels, with only a few scabs of paint remaining on the spokes, converged at the tops; the rear wheels diverged. She got down with a bustling alacrity that reflected the urgency of her task, smoothed her voluminous bombazine skirt of the exact shade of dark bottle green as the remaining pile on the plush of the gig's up-

holstery, grasped three soiled muslin bags that contained her herbs, and went toward the house, the warts of her face emphasizing the tic with which her features at ten seconds intervals registered her determination and haste to respond to the call of professional duty. Most of the outdoor slaves were in the cotton field, but the Widow ignored that none ran to take care of her horse. The mare was too fat and too lazy to stir without urging, and besides she knew that her husband on his dun gelding was only a minute or two behind her.

Mede, although not a stable hand, saw the rig unattended and deigned to come for the mare and lead her to the barn. He also saw Redfield approaching and called Big Pearl to care for the second horse.

The doctor dismounted and handed the bridle to the girl, who took it gingerly. Mede, seeing her fear, exchanged horses with her. "Here," he suggested, "you take this 'un. He gen'ler. Won't rare up."

Unable to refrain from professional observation, Redfield greeted the girl approvingly, "The way you bellyin' out at this stage, you goin' to have a purentee gyascutus."

Big Pearl was flattered by the compliment, showing her teeth in a giggle.

Memnon opened the door and Redfield knew that he would find Maxwell in the sitting room. Blanche, barefooted, her pregnancy obvious, was with her father-in-law, but she hastily left by way of the dining room with her toddy goblet in hand as the guest came down the hall.

"Whure the Widder?" Redfield asked.

"I don' know. I reckon, an' she come, she went right away up. It's Dite, Ham's own wench; that is she was before," Maxwell explained.

"An' he wantin' the best fer her. The Widder, she right good. She slip it right out."

Maxwell was busy in calling Meg to stir his guest a drink, when Redfield burst into a guffaw. "The Widder 'sisted I got to squire her along," he explained his presence, slapping his lean thigh.

There was no need to excuse his coming since he was at all times welcome at Falconhurst, and Maxwell's glance showed that he failed to understand the hilarity.

"She fearin' to come, skeared of you," Doc wiped the laughter from his eyes to elucidate. "Say she ain't traipsin' alone to no rapscallion, ol', single gen'leman's house." Again he shivered with derisive mirth. "I tellin' her them warts of hern enough to save her from rapin'."

"I feared, the shape I'm in, I couldn't 'commodate a lady noways," Maxwell smiled wryly. "Besides, Ham's wife is here; she guard her."

"I reckon the Widder afeared that Miz Ham might be—indisposed."

Maxwell was not sure whether the reference was to Blanche's pregnancy or her inebriety. He knew that Redfield intended no disparagement.

Hammond came in and sat down, brushing Meg away with the drink he brought for him. Plainly anxious, his ears were cocked more for sounds from

upstairs than for the conversation of the older men.

"They sayin' the vomit ragin' in New Orleans," Redfield made talk. "A gen'leman at the tavern, come right from there, sayin'."

Maxwell refused to take alarm. "Ever' summer," he nodded, "Ever' summer the same. The cause I not cravin' Hammond go there in summer—the vomit an' waitin' until after cotton when ever'body got they money."

"Had ought to be gittin' better this time of year," Hammond ventured. "Ain't no danger now, October."

"Won't be danger, time you-all ready. Cool weather cleans it right up."

A creaking of the stairs followed by the swish of bombazine brought Ham to his feet. He opened the door as the midwife came down the hall hugging in her arms a baby wrapped in a shawl.

"No trouble, no trouble at all," she declared. "I wasn't needed. Anybody could do it."

"Whut kind?" Hammond plucked at the shawl.

"I ain't rightly had no time to look. Buck; I think so, anyways," said the woman, opening the parcel.

"An' it yourn, it a buck," said the proud grandfather. "You don' fetch nothin' else. Reckon you ain't got no wenches in you."

The shawl laid back, Hammond was aghast. The red baby, kicking and crying, was covered with a golden fuzz.

"Mustee," breathed Ham.

"Mustee?" repeated his father, rising to look at the child. "Troublous, all on 'em. They comes white, they makes trouble. Reckon though you cravin' to keep it." The old man proposed no alternative.

The baby ceased to cry and directed its unfocused gaze at Redfield, who remarked, "Maxwell eyes, regular Warren Maxwell eyes, blue as lobelia flowers."

"I better claim it mine, mayhap. Save trouble around," Warren Maxwell all but tittered as he gestured vaguely to indicate the part of the house where Blanche might be.

"She ain't carin', not about this one," Hammond sighed, reluctant to be relieved of the credit for paternity. " 'Sides, it was afore she come, afore we got marr'ed."

"It mine," the old man insisted. "Remember it mine—the las', I reckon, I ever go' to sire. An' we'll name him 'Doc', after Doc Redfield here."

He called Meg to stir fresh toddies for a christening toast to Doc, but the Widow, avowing her temperance, rewrapped the blond baby in its shawl and took it upstairs to its mother's breast.

CHAPTER 33

WHILE Lucretia Borgia, by her own volition, was up, cooking meals and bossing the plantation, two days after the delivery of her child, Dite remained ten days abed, cared for solicitously, even lovingly, by her successor in her master's bed. Ellen was not unmindful of how soon she, herself, might require such attention. Dite was indifferent to the baby, except that she valued the status it gave her to bear her master's child, but Ellen loved it for its own sake, it was a baby, a blue-eyed, white baby, and it was Hammond's.

It was hot and still, the afternoon half expired. There was no breeze and nothing stirred. Maxwell sat in a big chair in the shade of the gallery, asleep, with Alph asleep in the sun at his feet. Both had been drinking toddies from a single goblet. It amused the white man to make the small Negro tipsy by giving him frequent swallows from his own glass. The goblet had toppled and spilled on the floor beside the chair and the spot was speckled with flies drawn by the sugar.

Hammond was in the field, supervising the gleaning of cotton, perhaps the final picking, either there or with the rail-splitting gang, the sound of whose axes was audible in the distance, if one listened. Maxwell's head tottered to his right shoulder and fell forward, and his face contorted in his dream. Alph, supine, snored lightly.

The clatter of a gallop was subdued by the rustle of drying leaves on the lane, a gallop that betokened haste unwonted at Falconhurst. It brought Lucretia Borgia from the kitchen to see what could be so urgent.

"It cholrie, it cholrie," proclaimed, all but shouted Redfield, springing from his horse.

Maxwell raised his head and opened his eyes, blinded by sunlight. Seeing who it was, he muttered hospitably enough but without enthusiasm, "Come in! Come in!" And then he called, "Mem, another chair! Meg, stir us some toddies! Somebody take Doc Redfield's horse! Whure at are all them niggers? Under foot when nobody wantin' 'em."

He kicked Alph awake with his boot, and the boy took the horse. Lucretia Borgia brought another chair.

The while Redfield, staring with wild eyes, reiterated in a confidential whisper what he had just asserted so loudly, "It's cholrie! it's cholrie, I'm a-tellin' you! Ain't the vomit, no sich thing, it's cholrie!"

"Whut you talkin' 'bout, Doc Redfield? Who got it? I ain't hearin' of any aroun'." Maxwell wanted meaning from the incoherence.

"The tavern! I jest rid from the tavern, hard as ol' Skelter could fetch me."

"Who down with it? Pearl down?"

"No! Ain't nobody down aroun' here—yet! Cain't you un'erstand? In New

Orleans, got cholrie in New Orleans! Two men passin' through, runnin' from it."

"Oh, that all? Reckon that place ain't never clean shet of cholrie, or somethin'. Drink your toddy."

"But it ragin', sweepin' the whole place. Ever'body either dyin' or gittin' out, goin' to their plantations or upriver or whurever. One day you're hearty, next day you dead."

"Ain't that a fac'? Anywhure?" Maxwell refused to show alarm. "*The Advertiser* ain't said nothin'."

"*The Advertiser* won't, but it true. You ain't leavin' Ham go there? I ain't a-goin', not a step. Got to leave me out."

"Neither ain't Hammond, an' it bad as you sayin'. You know danged good an' well, I ain't sendin' no thousand-dollars-a-head niggers, leavin' Hammond alone, into no pest hole."

"I reckoned," Redfield breathed easier, although he had in fact not reckoned at all. "I hatin' to quit that trip, but—."

Hammond rounded the corner of the house, greeted the visitor, and squatted on the gallery floor. Meg brought him a chair, but he told the boy, "Nev' mind," and continued to sit on the floor, his feet on the ground. He looked inquiringly at the faces of the older men, and his father broke the doctor's news.

" 'Tain't nothin'. I ain't bein' balked," he affirmed. "Cotton all picked, niggers primed an' ready. I goin'!"

"Not an' cholrie ragin'," his father argued in a wheedling tone as if to a small child. "Not a-sayin' yet awhile it be, but ifn—."

"I not askeared," said Hammond unconvincingly.

"Well, I am," Redfield confessed. "You goin', you goin' alone."

"You not skeared, no," conceded Maxwell. "But them niggers! Barracoons ain't clean. An' besides, ever'body away, there ain't no sale fer 'em. Won't bring nothin'."

"Might risk Natchez," suggested Redfield. "It ain't got upriver."

"Might," Maxwell assented. "Might, New Orleans. 'Pends on whut *The Advertiser* say. Natchez a good market—'Forks-of-the-Road.' "

Nothing was settled. Hammond's disappointment disturbed his father. Cholera in New Orleans was perhaps not so general as the rumor at Pearl's tavern had led the doctor to believe.

But the next issue of the weekly *Advertiser* confirmed the panic; the epidemic could no longer be ignored. Persons who had a place to go were getting out. Business was stagnant. The facts which had earlier been concealed were now, that they could no longer be kept secret, enlarged fivefold and flaunted. If the newspaper was unable to repress a panic, it was profitable to produce a sensational one. It proclaimed unctuously that the *Advertiser* staff would remain to serve, perhaps to sicken, if not to die.

That Hammond should go to New Orleans at such a time was unthink-

able. It would be not only hazardous but futile.

Redfield came again, gloating that the truth had borne out his rumor. After a canvass of their respective advantages as a vendue of slaves, Natchez was chosen over Mobile. Buyers from Louisiana and emigrants to the Texas country were more likely to be found at Natchez, where the market was always brisk, even when New Orleans flourished. Cane was more profitable than cotton had ever been, even before the Alabama soil was sapped. Buyers would be flusher on the river than on the gulf. Cholera, by some reasoning, seemed less likely. Against Natchez was the ease of floating down the Tombigbee and on to Mobile, an easy journey, but not so stirring as the ride across Mississippi, where the richness of the soil reflected itself in the luxury of its owners. Natchez it should be, and the start should be made a week from Monday, at sunup. That would be, Hammond consulted the almanac, the fifteenth of November, mid-month, early enough before Christmas and late enough that crops would be sold and the money yet unspent.

"I doubt me that you gits as much as you reckons, but take it. Git whut you kin, but take whut offers, Son, an' don' repine. Don' bring none of 'em back with you. Takin' 'em along to sell, sell 'em. May have to hold a public cry of 'em, but private treaty better. That a-way you knows who is a-gittin' 'em, how they goin' to be dealt with," Maxwell counseled his son.

"Armfield and Franklin got a jail at the Forks, right neat an' shipshape. Best place, an' you kin git 'em in; ever'body know whure it at, an' ever'body wantin' hands goes there first or last," he continued his advice, Hammond giving it close heed. "Course, ifn A. and F. full,—new-come coffle or niggers not sellin' or somepin'— you got to look aroun'.

"Doc, he purty guiley. You mire down, he he'p you out. On'y use your own noggin, not hisn. Comes a wrangle between your way and hisn, do yours; I wants you should learn. But when you dubious, ast Doc."

Hammond drank in the instructions and resolved to remember them. They left him a free hand.

"Not many boys, nineteen, goin' about carryin' a coffle to market."

"An' I not take 'em, I cain't reckon how they git there," Hammond rebutted, stung by the emphasis upon his youth.

"You right," acknowledged the old man, "and I'm proud that you kin, proud I got you. I don' know whut I'd do."

In the days pending Hammond's departure, he had to listen over and over again to his father's charges and advice. He did not resent the necessity, since he had confidence in the paternal sagacity and, besides, the instructions were so vague as to leave him free to do as he believed best. Try as Maxwell did to foresee what would, or might, befall on the expedition, and to lay down a policy to meet every contingency, it was impossible to envision every possible happening. Hammond would be compelled to improvise policy as he went along. Accepting the responsibility and knowing that he should do as he pleased, it did not irk him to listen to the garrulity.

"You ain't carryin' me along?" Blanche attacked the subject one night after supper after Maxwell had left the dining room. "You say you take me along to New Orleans, come fall and cotton pickin' over."

"I ain't goin' to New Orleans. Cholrie. You knows it. I ain't goin' there. Besides, look down at yourself. You in no shape to go, no shape at all. How I know, do you reckon, you goin' to be stickin' out when I say? No white lady hanker to be seen the way you are. You got to stay close to home until that boy come." To mitigate the girl's disappointment, Hammond added, "You stay close an' ack nice, I bring you sumpin' when I come, a fine cloak or sumpin'."

"I don' never go nowhures. I cain't wear it," she retorted.

"Well, sumpin', sumpin' nice, an' sumpin' fer the boy when he goin' to come."

"I reckon you goin' to carry along that Ellen nigger? That the cause you ain't carryin' me."

Hammond sniffed in feigned amusement. "Ellen's belly stickin' out much as yourn, almos'. Ellen knowin' she cain't go. Ain't neither one of you no good to me, the way you are."

"Then you fixin' to pleasure with all them white ladies ever'body sayin' Natchez full of, them white whores. That whut you goin' fer?"

"I goin' to sell niggers, business, an' you knowin' it," Hammond wasted his indignation. "Besides, I don' crave to pleasure with no white ladies. White ladies make me puke."

The factual young man was inadvertent of his wife's blondness when he spoke, despite that the statement was the generic truth. Blanche knew that her husband was repelled by the whiteness of a woman's skin, although he had never told her so before. He believed it to be skin color and the odor of white bodies that he did not like, whereas in fact it was a need to possess, to command, to order his sexual object, in a manner he was unable to do with a woman free and white. A white woman might deny or temporize with his exigencies. It was a fear of rebuff. His choice was not between white and black (or yellow), but between free and chattel.

Compassion prompted Hammond to suggest toddies for Blanche and himself as they entered the sitting room where the elder Maxwell was already drinking. Well he knew that nothing else was more likely to assuage his wife's disappointment and to mollify her resentment of his preference for dusky skins.

The same night, Meg, struggling to remove his master's boot, broached, "Whenabouts, Masta, suh, we goin'?"

"When we goin' whure?"

"When we goin' that place, you know, suh, to sell them niggers?" Meg shrugged in acknowledgment of his ignorance. "I 'on' know whure."

"You reckons you goin' along?" asked the master with a low chuckle. "Well, you ain't."

"I yo' nigger," Meg pouted.

"I know you my nigger. An' I takes you along, you goin' to be somebody's else nigger; I'll sell you along the others in Natchez."

The boy recognized that the white man was joking, but his lackluster smile of response was tinged with fear. He was not for sale, he knew; but his master's whims were unpredictable. "Who goin' to jack yo' boots off fer you, suh?"

"I got sixteen other niggers to jack my boots. Don' need you. You stay home here an' stir toddies fer your ol' masta. That whut. Ever'body wantin' to ride along." To prove that there was no malice in his refusal, Hammond pinched the muscle of the boy's thigh until he grunted with pain.

The Sunday prior to the departure was given over to visiting and to farewells among the slaves. These were not painful. At Falconhurst family loyalties were not encouraged and hardly existed. Slaves born on the plantation knew their mothers, but for the most part were separated from them before puberty and the ties disrupted. Most of them had never known their fathers, who, in any event, had been disposed of and forgotten before their young were old enough to be concerned about them.

Parental and filial affections, where they exist, are cultural conventions, and there is no more reason for a son to cherish a mother, or a mother a son, after she has ceased to nourish him, than for the attachment of either to persons of no kinship. Among slaves, family pride, unless they knew they were bastards of white fathers, was unknown. The Maxwells, with awareness of these phenomena, deliberately loosened and severed consanguineal ties.

The sales-draft had been fed and worked and massaged and primed not only to bring them into a physical condition to command a high price on the market but also, however incidentally, to produce a rose-hued euphoria, which, along with their youth, enabled them to face their fortunes with enthusiasm. They were leaving Falconhurst with no regrets. It was not that they had been mistreated or even thought that they had; they knew of no other kind of treatment than the kind that had been meted them and had nothing with which to make a comparison. They had been adequately fed, sheltered under a leak-proof roof, worked lightly, and, except switchings for childish peccadillos, never flogged. What better could a slave ask?

To the Maxwells they were cattle, valuable cattle and irresponsible, cattle reared and conditioned for sale. It was as unprofitable to abuse Negroes as hogs or horses. The owners took pride in the husbandry, care and comfort of their servants. It was no desire to escape from Falconhurst or their masters that motivated the slaves' ardor for leaving; rather it was a knowledge, if vague, that there was another world with other people, faces, scenes, activities, away from the plantation, and there was youth's desire for experience, adventure.

Pity was less warranted for those who would go than for those left behind, whose only consolation was that they should be included in some subsequent

consignment. They attributed an enviable glamour to the ones who were to be sold.

Twinkle was pregnant, but less obviously so than the other women who were to be sold. Only the mustee remained aloof from the farewells; there was none to whom he wished to say good-bye. Ace was glad to escape from the surveillance of Vulcan, to whom he had been given in charge and who had exercised his authority with a greater rigor than Hammond had intended. About to be separated from the home of their youth, to be sent they knew not whither and to fall they knew not into whose hands, there was no repining among the slaves.

CHAPTER 34

THE morning star had hardly risen, when Hammond, hearing a clatter of horse's hoofs, sent Meg to open the door for Redfield, to care for his horse, and to mix a toddy for him. Ellen helped Hammond to dress in his plum coat for his journey and to pull on his boots. Lucretia Borgia was up, preparing breakfast, and his father met Hammond in the hall at the head of the stairs. Blanche remained abed and her husband did not disturb her. She heard but was indifferent to the bustle in the house.

The Negroes who were to be sold had risen and were gathering in front of the house, along with some others who had got up see the spectacle of departure. The carriage pole had been removed from the surrey, and shafts substituted, between which there was now hitched a decrepit black mule with a white blaze down its forehead. Florida and Sheba were already in the back seat, calling for Fanny and Twinkle to hasten, else they would be left behind. Hammond had appointed Twinkle to drive the mule. Lucretia Borgia had prepared large parcels of pone for the journey and had packed them into the surrey at the feet of the women.

Hammond consumed a hearty breakfast, Redfield a lighter one, his second, and Maxwell was unable to eat at all. He continued to spout counsel and warnings, all of which he had spoken a dozen times before.

Vulcan had the gentlemen's horses, and the three Mandingos watched from a corner near their cabin. Doc Redfield shook his friend's hand and vaulted to Skelter's back.

On the gallery, Hammond kissed Lucretia Borgia, turned to kiss Ellen, lastly embraced and kissed his father, seeing the tears in his eyes. He mounted his horse and rode around the crowd of Negroes, giving orders and trying to separate those who were going from those remaining behind. He lined up the slaves in a column of twos, Pole and Vulcan at the head, Atrides and Ace at its rear. The surrey would follow the men. Pole fell out of ranks to buss Lucretia Borgia, much to the visible displeasure of Memnon.

"You ain't a-goin' to have no more of that, boy, is you?" Doc laughed rhetorically.

"I gits me a kin' masta whut got plenty wenches, Masta, suh," Pole answered, undaunted as he resumed his place.

"We goin' now," called Hammond and the column moved roughly and out-of-step down the lane, Maxwell and the house slaves waving from the gallery, the Mandingos from their cabin, the stay-at-home slaves chattering and cheering, Redfield cracking his whip at the heels of the moving men.

"I never heared of movin' a coffle without chainin' 'em," Redfield called across the column to Hammond, riding on the right. "One run an' you'll rue it, not a-chainin'."

"Ain't none of these niggers goin' to run," Hammond called back from the

other side. "They all crave sellin', don' you, boys?"

There was a chorus of affirmatives from the men.

A cold, hazy sun was peeping over the horizon.

Hammond dropped back to the rear of the column, and a laughing woman in the surrey called to him, "We a-layin' off to all be sol' to one masta! You reckon, Masta, suh?"

"I reckon; I try to git one masta fer you all," Hammond answered idly.

The party reached Benson before noon, ate dinner at the tavern, planned to get as far as Shobuta before nightfall, but failed. It made little difference. They ate a supper of pone, tethered the horses and mule, and lay down in the lee of a clump of pines to sleep, the white men covered with their saddle-blankets.

Their sleep was fitful, but toward morning, sound. The sun was already shining when Hammond aroused Redfield. It was resolved to push on to Shobuta before breakfast.

In the turmoil of starting, Hammond missed the mustee. "Whure that mustee? Whure that Ace, god damn him?" he shouted. "Whure you reckon he be?"

"I sayin' to you yestiday you better chain 'em," Redfield laughed. "I ain't sayin' he run, but——"

"Ace sayin' he go' to, Masta, suh," Atrides spoke up.

"Goin' to whut?"

"Run," Atrides supplied.

"He ain't run," Hammond was confident. "He over in them woods, most like. But he holdin' us back."

Ace did not return. The clump of pines was searched. Hammond was disconsolate.

"I'll take the hide offn him, ever' smidgen of that white hide. God damn! Papa say never trus' a mustee."

"Might ride him down," Redfield suggested.

"Might. But whuch way?" Hammond countered. "Got to git these niggers to market. Cain't waste time a-ridin' ever' whuch way."

They did nothing because there was nothing that could be done. Ace had escaped.

The slow march was resumed and they reached Shobuta short of nine o'clock. *The Weekly Shobuta Advocate* appeared on Fridays, and Hammond left his coffle at the Shobuta House while he went to the printing office to arrange for an advertisement to announce Ace's escape. The publisher wrote it for him as follows:

NEGRO AT LARGE!!!

A mustee negro, almost white, about sixteen years, no marks, escaped Tuesday from a coffle near Shobuta. Unarmed but dangerous. Probably bound for former home in Eastern Alabama. Owner will pay reward to anybody taking him up. $100 alive. $50 dead. For sale

cheap, running. Report to Advocate office or to Subscriber, H. Maxwell, Falconhurst Plantation, Benson, Alabama.

The publisher also agreed to make a story of the escape for his reading columns. It was the most noteworthy occurrence in the community for months, only second in news interest to the epidemic of cholera in New Orleans. Hammond paid for four insertions, returned to the hotel, and, with his coffle, got under way.

"You reckon in Natchez, when they sees that notice, they goin' to reckon Falconhurst niggers is runners? Nobody goin' to crave buyin' 'em?" Hammond put the question, which had just occurred to him, with misgivings.

"Ain't nobody Natchez way goin' to see that Shobuta paper," Redfield reassured him. "You got me along, anyways; I kin tell 'em. But better tear that certificate of mine an' Banker Meyer's about that mustee."

Hammond stopped, went into his saddlebags, and discarded the certificate.

"It worryin' me, whut am I goin' to tell Papa," Hammond sighed. "Leavin' a nigger run, 'bout seven-fifty, eight hun'ert dollar worth."

"The ol' man not wantin' 'em chained, either," Redfield reflected aloud. "Had ought to know to chain 'em together in a coffle. Your papa too easy, you too, it come to niggers."

The pace was slow, the male slaves plodding along on foot, the women following in the surrey with the decrepit mule. Hammond permitted the boys to stop and rest when they were tired, since he did not want them jaded when they should reach Natchez. Redfield was impatient of such delays.

Back at Falconhurst, the owner, after his son's departure, engaged in an hour's orgy of orders, but succumbed to his toddies soon and left the management of the plantation to Lucretia Borgia. There was little to be done except to see that the Negroes were fed, which was Lucretia Borgia's task even when Hammond was at home. Cotton was picked and there was little at the season for the slaves to do.

Blanche came downstairs and sat with her father-in-law. He did not restrict her toddies. Besides that, she was happier with her husband away, since she knew that he was not in dalliance with Ellen. She was less jealous of the other slave girls and not at all of Tense now. She resented the distortion of her figure by pregnancy, knew that Ellen was just as big, but did not credit that pregnancy deterred Hammond from his attentions to the Negro woman.

There was little for Maxwell and Blanche to talk about that they had not discussed a hundred times. Maxwell recounted again the virtues of his dead wife and of the son she had left him, subjects unpleasant to Blanche, since he seemed to imply her shortcomings by his praise of the others. He had no such intentions. She liked better his dissertations about plantation economy and slave husbandry, about which she cared nothing but in which she recognized no criticism of herself. She could lie back in her chair and let her

thoughts rove until Maxwell had talked himself out and fallen asleep. Meg was always at hand with another toddy when her glass was emptied.

Tuesday Blanche woke early, and was unable to go back to sleep. She lay thinking of Hammond's trip and of how she would have liked to be taken with him. She arose, put on her Mother Hubbard, and joined her father-in-law. The day was warmer than any for a long while; otherwise, the same as yesterday, the same talk, the same toddies, the same growing burden in her body, the same dinner, the same ennui. After dinner there were more toddies, until Maxwell resolved to sit on the gallery with his feet in the sunshine, leaving her in the house.

She was aware that she was a little drunk. Her feet were unsteady when she crossed the sitting room and went down the hall toward the stairs. She threw herself upon her bed, sick. Her stomach churned. She knew that she should be unable to hold its contents, rose on her elbow, and spewed her dinner and the toddies she had drunk upon the carpet beside her bed. Tense came to hold her head and to comfort her. Blanche felt better and fell back on the bed, and Tense cleaned the vomit from the floor as best she was able and from the quilt upon which it had spattered.

Suddenly Blanche rose, stood swaying on her feet. "Carry here that yaller slut, that Ellen sow," she told Tense. "Carry her up here. I knows whut I goin' to do to her. Git her."

Tense hesitated.

"You fetch her. I goin' to whup her, whup that pup of Hammond's right out o' her. Fetch her."

Tense had no alternative than to obey her mistress, and went down the hall and down the stairs. Blanche rummaged in a drawer of her dresser and brought forth a long whip, stood beside the window trying to snap it. Even if she had been sober, she could not have wielded the whip which was too big for her and for the space in which she swung it. She was so much engrossed by her efforts to manipulate the whip that the time did not seem long to her until Tense returned with Ellen, unalarmed and curious.

"Peel down, you slut, peel down, peel you down nekid," Blanche greeted the girl. "Tear off her osnaberg, Tense, all 'em. I goin' to lambaste that big belly o' yourn, goin' to lambaste that yaller sucker right outn it, goin' to cut you up, cut you up so bad with this snake that no white man ever goin' to look at you, lettin' alone pleasure you."

The speech was a long one for Blanche. Ellen stood big-eyed and terrified before her, making no move to comply with the command but not resisting Tense's efforts to remove her clothes. Blanche waved the whip aloft and brought it down on Tense, struggling with Ellen, who entirely escaped the futile blow. Ellen made no move to escape. She did not weep, but faced the white woman, dry-eyed and staunch. To resist her owner's wife did not occur to Ellen; she belonged to Hammond, and Blanche had the right to use her as she should see fit.

Tense undressed Ellen, who stood nude before her mistress, her pregnancy evident. The blows of the whip that Blanche sought to inflict on Ellen lost their force before they reached her because of the white woman's ineptitude in swinging it. Who knew that the ensuing lash would not cut into her flesh? Who knew, if the whip should not be effective, to what other vengeance the drunken woman would resort?

Blanche uttered a low invective as she swung the whip. She was livid with rage, slow, deliberate in her drunken efforts to use the whip. She resented that her blows were of no effect. Vileness flowed from Blanche's mouth, words she had never before employed, terms of which she did not know any meaning except that they were vile, as she intended they should be.

Ellen did not understand Blanche's words, but sensed her execration, knowing not for what. She faced the white woman, her face bloodless. The forceless blows continued to descend. Ellen, oblivious of blows, was wilted by the insults to which she was unable to reply. At length she could endure no more. She screamed. She knew not why or for what she screamed. Her wail rent the day and died away, only to be renewed. At length she was exhausted and sank to the floor, weeping.

Lucretia Borgia heard the first of Ellen's screams without concern. When the noise was renewed and renewed again, she left the ham she was preparing to boil and went to see whence issued such a call of agony. Located as coming from Blanche's room, it had stopped by the time Lucretia Borgia burst through the door.

Blanche, caught, dropped her whip and retreated to the bed, where she lay face down and kicked her heels in the air.

Lucretia Borgia stood just inside the door and surveyed the scene, sensing what had occurred. She planted herself, arms akimbo. She dared not reveal the indignation she felt.

"Go," she commanded Tense, "an call Ol' Masta. Tell him to come. Help him climb them stairs. Fetch him."

"No, no, no," Blanche called from the bed. "Not him, not him. Cain't you see, she nekid. Ain't nice he should come."

Lucretia Borgia stood silent. "Go," she told Tense again. "Bring him quick as you kin."

In the interminable time before Maxwell arrived, nobody moved, except that Lucretia Borgia stooped and flung toward Ellen her dress which would serve to cover a part of her nudity, to which Ellen, after her excoriation, was indifferent. Neither was the man, when he came, concerned with it.

He surveyed the room, saw the whip, cast carelessly to the floor, the weeping girl on the floor, Blanche on the bed, and he reconstructed in his besotted mind what had occurred. "Carry her, carry her out and down," he ordered Lucretia Borgia, gesturing toward Ellen.

When they were gone, he walked toward the bed and leaned over it. "Whut this mean?" he demanded of Blanche. When she made no answer except a

sob, he repeated his question and added reprovingly, as to a child, "It ain't nice, ain't ladylike. Now git you up an' we go down an' drink a toddy." It was the only recrimination that he could offer a white woman. He knew that he could add nothing to the malice the girl vented upon herself, the shame she felt.

Hiding her face in the pillow, Blanche was convulsed with sobs. "Go 'way, go 'way, go 'way," she implored. She was sober now.

Maxwell knew that the incident would not be repeated. He made his way downstairs and ordered a toddy. Rocking in his chair, he was beset by doubts of what Hammond would say about what had occurred. Perhaps, if Ellen could be silenced, he need never know about it.

He drank his toddy and waited for another. His back was turned to the door of the dining room, and when he heard it open he assumed it was Meg. It was Lucretia Borgia.

"Masta, suh," she said, her lips dry with terror. "Masta, suh," she repeated but could not go on.

"Whut ailin', now, Lucretia Borgia?" he asked, irritably.

"She slip it, suh, Masta, suh. She slip it."

"Who slip whut? Whure that saplin' with my toddy?"

"Ellen, suh, done slip that sucker she carry."

"Whut you mean?" he asked, unbelieving.

Lucretia Borgia repeated the tidings, and asked. "Whut I goin' to do?"

Maxwell got to his feet, while the impact of the information adumbrated his consciousness. "Why, I don' know. Put her in Ham's bed. Is she bad? The sucker alive?" he asked; and answered his own question. "Course not."

Maxwell followed the cook back to her kitchen, where Ellen lay on Lucretia Borgia's pallet, exhausted. There was nothing he could do now. He went to the medicine shelf, poured a dose of laudanum, carried it back to the girl, stooped and with his own hand held the glass to her mouth. "Tote her up to his bed," he again admonished Lucretia Borgia.

Meg followed him back into the sitting room with his toddy on a tray. It would now be impossible to conceal the afternoon's occurrence from Hammond. How mitigate his wrath? He blamed himself for permitting Blanche to drink so many toddies.

"Tell that Lucretia Borgia, come here," he instructed the boy.

"She up, suh, Masta—with Miz Ellen," answered the boy, aware that something, he knew not what, was amiss.

"When she come down, tell her. Don' fergit."

It was a half hour before the woman presented herself.

"Miz Blanche," Maxwell began directly, "did she hurt that Ellen, cut her with that snake?"

"No 'um, suh. Never touch her at all, hardly." Lucretia Borgia knew the white man wanted her denial. "Miz Blanche ain't know how to han'le that whup."

"Then it wasn't no snake that move Ellen to slip that chil'?" he asked hopefully.

Lucretia Borgia saw her cue. "Oh, naw, suh. Naw, suh, Masta. Ellen about to slip it anyways. Wasn't no snake."

The man ruminated his tobacco while the woman waited. "We ain't goin' to tell Masta Hammond when he come home nothin' about it," he concluded.

"No, suh, Masta," the woman acceded. "On'y he goin' to see first thing that Ellen ain't totin' no chil'."

"Course, he goin' to see that. Cain't hide that she slip it. Only ain't sayin' why, ain't sayin' Miz Blanche ——"

"Miz Blanche never do nothin', never do nothin'," Lucretia Borgia repeated to impress the idea upon herself.

"You tell that Ellen. Tell her not to say to her masta when he goin' to come—nothin', nothin'. I talks myself to Miz Blanche. Ellen not goin' to say nothin' at all."

"Yas, suh, Masta, an' if you says," Lucretia Borgia agreed.

"I says," the master ordained with finality.

CHAPTER 35

THE coffle reached Natchez by easy but impatient stages Friday afternoon, by the east road, moving through the wide, dusty streets, busy with traffic, to the Forks-of-the-Road to the north of the city. The Negroes were fatigued and dust covered from their long journey, but their interest in what appeared to them to be a great city buoyed them. They had never seen so many people.

Hammond had his choice among the half dozen barracoons, all of which were well nigh empty. Because his father had recommended it and because it appeared cleanest and most spacious, he chose the slave jail of Armfield and Franklin, a mere stockade, enclosing an open space surrounded by sheds and cabins. A battered sign, "Armfield and Franklin, Negroes and Mules," sagged wearily from a post before the gate.

A middle-aged Negro woman sat on a broken chair, smoking a pipe, before one of the cabins, and two half grown children, boy and girl, played in the dust not far removed from her. A crippled male slave, a rail on his shoulder, hobbled across the far end of the area.

Two mulatto men, stalwart but bored, slouched out to meet the Maxwell coffle, and one returned to the best of the houses, immediately inside the gate, to summon the white man in charge, who came rubbing the sleep from his eyes, but, once fully awake, seemed brisk and alert enough.

"Nice coffle," he affirmed, eyeing the Negroes. "All healthy, I reckon. Yes, plenty of room fer 'em now, but Mista Franklin shippin' this week or next from up Washington. These not sold, time hisn come, got to ast you should move."

"How is niggers?" Hammond asked.

"High, high," the white man said. "Cain't git 'em, an' cain't keep 'em. That ol' wench a-settin' an' them saplin's, they an' one ol' man, him cripp'd, all we got fer sale—an' others ain't got hardly no more."

"These of mine had ought to sell?" Hammond said hopefully. "I was thinkin' mayhap that cholrie in New Orleans—"

"Helps sales," the man completed the sentence. "Ever'body come here instead. Town full. Of course, I not knowin' how much you hopin' of this coffle; but, looks of 'em, they had ought to sell right peart. Nobody got none fer sale."

Hammond dismounted and handed Eclipse to Phrensy.

"Got to charge you, though, charge you good. Town's full from New Orleans. Ever'thin' up. Four bits a head ever' day, an' two bits fer the mule." The caretaker by his tone admitted the outrage of his tariff, but went on. "We got ever'thin' though, washin' places an' all, chains an' you need 'em, a good post fer floggin', and we feeds good, all they wants."

Hammond didn't haggle about the price, although it seemed to him high.

He began showing his slaves to their quarters, instructing them to wash and rest, warning them not to venture beyond the gates of the stockade. The brisk white man and the moping mulattoes helped him in settling the Negroes, who were well contented with what they found.

The Natchez House and the Planters Hotel were both full. Their lobbies were alive with people, the streets under the awnings seething with excitement. The packet from New Orleans was due with another consignment of refugees. The desk clerk at the Planters suggested that Hammond and Redfield might by chance find quarters at Squires and directed them to it, a block down the main street and another block to the right. Redfield was reluctant to leave the turmoil of the larger hotels, but there was no choice.

Squires was not a hotel at all, only a large boarding house, functioning as a hotel. The big-busted, florid woman who rocked on the verandah looked the men over as they came up the wooden sidewalk, bordered by weedy grass.

"Jist one left," she announced, "one room. An' it ain't big. One bed fer two of you, and maybe a pallet on the floor fer somebody wantin' it. Rates up, besides. A dollar and a half a day now, each one of ye. Take it or leave it, I ain't carin'. Be somebody, an' you don' want it. We feeds good. Ever'body satisfied."

The men had not spoken. The woman adjusted her hair behind her ears and resumed her rocking, her eyes focused upon a house across the street to emphasize her indifference to their decision. There could be but one decision; there was nowhere else to go.

"I reckon, an' you got a place fer our hosses," Hammond ventured.

"Four bits, four bits a day extry," the woman declared without refocusing her eyes.

Hammond accepted her terms and the woman began to call loudly for Royal. The men stood before her waiting. She called shrilly again and again for Royal. She rocked impatiently between her screeches—rock, rock, rock, rock, with a call for Royal always upon a forward movement of her chair.

Nothing could more belie Royal's name than his looks when he arrived, a matter of which the guests took no cognizance. Knock-kneed and rachitic, the sunken-cheeked black man with graying hair appeared from the interior of the house.

"Royal, you need tearin' down," the woman began. "Whyn't you come when I call? Don' say you cain't hear me. You hear, you comes."

"Yas, ma'am, suh," said Royal unperturbed, and waited to learn what his mistress wanted.

"I go to have Herman tear you down, you hear, you damn black nigger. Royal, you hear me, you. Reckon I kin spare you tomorrer to Herman. He sen' you back spry or dead, one of the two. Cost me money, havin' you whup, cos' me money. But I'm a-goin' to, I'm a-goin' to, I'm a-goin' to, so help me."

The Negro responded without sign of fear, "Yes, 'um."

"These gen'lemen goin' into number seven. You take 'em. Take 'em up

an' show 'em. Both in the bed," she instructed. "Dinin' room open at five. Better come early, wantin' the best," she called to her guests as they moved away following the slave.

Hammond, after inspecting the sparse comforts of the room, was tired. He remounted Eclipse, none the less, and rode back to the Forks to make sure his Negroes were at ease and to see to it that they should be fed.

When he arrived, he found the two mulattoes handing about among the slaves great pans of beef stew that assailed his white nostrils enticingly. The women had beds to sleep on, the men large heaps of long straw. All were comfortable.

A single horse was tied to the hitching rack, and a man was surveying his slaves.

"That the owner. Got to talk to him," the white caretaker explained to the buyer. "I ain't got nothin' to do with 'em. They hisn."

The man, florid faced, round bellied, short of leg, and noticeably bald when he removed his hat to wipe his head, came forward. "That one, he look right good. How much is he?" He pointed toward Phrensy.

"He fifteen hundert," Hammond improvised a price, not knowing what he should ask. "A right peart one, prime an' soun'."

The man grunted and turned to Lute, felt of him through his clothes. "An' that varmint? How much?"

"He cheaper. He only twelve hundert. Jest as good, though not as high up an' reachy-like."

The man grunted again. "Right reasonable," he nodded knowingly. "Sold fer no fault?"

"They warranteed, all on 'em," Hammond said expectantly.

"Might want one or two of 'em myself, an' I got friends cravin' some. Any wenches?"

Hammond interrupted the women's supper to show them off.

"Breeders yet," the buyer commented. "Not many breeders offered. Three on 'em knocked an' showin'. Hum."

"They all knocked," Hammond assured him, "though Twinkle here ain't showin' much yet."

"I wants one or two, shore do wants one or two," the man said, feeling of the women's arms and lifting their skirts to look at their legs. He returned to the boys, felt them over and threw stones for them to retrieve.

"Wants I should strip any of 'em down fer you to see?" Hammond inquired.

"No; reckon not. Not this evenin'. Come mornin'—," he made tentative plans.

He turned to Phrensy, asked the slave how he would like him for a master. "I treats 'em good, treats 'em all good. Good Christian home. One of my family," he promised.

At length, he took his departure, mounted his horse and rode away, his

gross, red face turned over his shoulder, still considering the slaves.

"That ol' Major Wilkins," the caretaker explained after the man had gone. "Ain't got no hands, an' never had none; no money. A little tetched, I reckon. Always lookin' aroun' fer niggers. Coffle comin' in, he al'ays first to look 'em over."

"I reckoned he goin' to buy two or three. Kind of wasted my wind on him, seem like," said Hammond in disappointment.

"No, Major won't buy; cain't. But he spreads things. He talks," the caretaker reasoned. "Ever'body, ever'body in Natchez goin' to know you here with servants fer sale, soun' an cheap. You ain't waste no words. The Major good to have."

Doc Redfield had saved a seat for Hammond next to his own at the long supper table at Squires Boarding House. The giant mammaries of Mrs. Kennedy, the woman with whom arrangements had been made on the porch, overhung the end of the table nearest the kitchen, whereas her wizened old husband presided at its head. The supper party was for seventeen, all men except Mrs. Kennedy.

"Jest met ol' Major Wilkins, tellin' that they's a new coffle at Armfield's at the Forks," one small man essayed conversation with nobody in particular in the midst of buttering a biscuit.

"Ol' Wilkins!" one laughed.

"Like, all sick. All goin' to die, come from the South. I'd be afeared o' 'em," a man sitting beyond Hammond expressed a guess.

"No, these from Alabamie or somewhures east, the Major said. Right healthy an' soun'," the small man corrected.

"Any fancies? I'll have to ride out," declared Mr. Kennedy. "Bin a-cravin' me another 'un."

"No fancies! I won't have a fancy aroun', an' you knows it, Ben Kennedy. 'Nough trouble with Dipsy here," Mrs. Kennedy pointed at the mulatto girl circling the table with a dish, "without no fancies. You men won't leave be poor Dipsy, though, Law knows, she ain't no fancy."

"Servants is up, seem like," commented the little man, with another biscuit.

"They ain't none offered, savin' a few, an' they triflin' an' puny."

"Folks afeared of New Orleans. All the buyers from Louisianie comin' here, an' nobody bringin' 'em in."

"I'd sell Royal, here, an' anybody wantin' him," said Mrs. Kennedy, and then qualified her statement, "-- an' if I could do withoutn him."

A man to whom Royal was offering a biscuit pushed back his chair and grasped the black boy's leg, felt it evaluatingly, pulled him forward and ran his finger into his mouth. "Won't bring much. Teeth gone, an' legs crooked. Won't las' a month in the cane," he expressed his opinion.

Hammond said nothing about his ownership of the coffle. The boarders at Squires were not slave-buyers, despite their talk.

Supper over, and travel-fatigued as they were, Redfield wanted to go to the bars and gambling houses. It was these for which he had come to Natchez. Hammond joined him, straggling after, limping. The bars were ablaze with lights and mirrors, far different from the tavern at Benson. Nudes adorned the walls. Drinkers were numerous, all kinds of men, men gaudily dressed in top hats with golden seals on heavy chains across their waistcoats, roughly dressed laborers, sportsmen and speculators, all with a hectic, heedless desperation to escape from something that threatened them. Many of them had recently come from New Orleans, refugees from the city's epidemic. Another packet was expected the same evening, and there was a disposition to expect friends among the passengers.

As Redfield and Hammond trudged from bar to bar, absorbing the sights and the excitement, they saw the same faces in the mirrors behind the counters. Redfield felt inclined to sit in a game of brag, and Hammond looked on until his partner had lost some twenty dollars and rose to relinquish his chair to a man waiting behind him. While twenty dollars seemed to Redfield a considerable loss, to the milling crowd money had no value. Tomorrow, they thought, they might die. At least they had escaped from the City, and they were concerned with little else. What was money for, if they had it?

A pallid tout showed Hammond and Redfield the way to Maggie's, and then disappeared. Maggie was herself buxom and had been handsome when she was half her present age, and the women in her brothel were comely enough. There must have been a dozen of them, but they were too busy to waste time talking to the clients, of which there was an increasing stream. Men were everywhere, upon the lounges, standing in doorways, sitting on floors. Maggie's was reputed to be the best place in the town.

The women all were white. Hammond was squeamish about white flesh, and was indifferent to the delay. The women had no allure for him. They were not his property; rather, they belonged for some fifteen minutes to whoever would pay for them. Hammond bought a bottle of wine, but the women were all too busy to drink with him and he was forced to share it with Redfield and with a strange man who stood near the table where the wine was served by a sluttish mulatto girl.

Redfield, however, had dreamed all summer of the debauch he should have in New Orleans. This was only Natchez, of course, but he was not to be cheated of his orgy. At Hammond's suggestion that they wait no longer for women, Redfield demurred.

"I been sleepin' with that warty widder. Now, I goin' to spen' my money an' buy me a purty, smooth, young 'un, whilst I kin," he argued. "Course, you got you a young piece; I ain't wonderin' you don't hanker after these."

A chubby little blond touched Hammond on the shoulder. "Come on, Honey," she said, "you mine. I bin a-servin' an' a-pleasurin' ol' men all evenin'. Now, doggone, I got aroun'. I bin a watchin' your baby face ever sence you come in, plannin' how I goin' to git to you."

Hammond looked at her blondness and shrugged. "I reckon not," he declined her offer. "I ain't a-feelin' good."

"You bus'? That whut the matter with you?" the girl asked compassionately. "Won't cos' you nothin', a purty boy like you."

"I ain't bust," Hammond denied, drawing out his purse. "I jest ain't a-feelin'."

The woman admitted her defeat. "Well, I cain't make you. Come back when you feel like; ast fer Zelda. Won't cos' you nothin', un'erstan'? Who a-waitin'?"

Redfield pressed forward. "I goin' with you," he volunteered.

The girl looked at the man, then looked toward Hammond and made a sneering face. "Well, come on," she resigned herself.

"You goin' to wait?" Redfield asked and received an assent from his companion. He walked rapidly away with the woman, leaving Hammond yawning, alone.

Maggie circulated apologetically. "I have a lady fer you right away," she told Hammond. "I'll have more girls tonight on the packet, plenty of 'em comin' from New Orleans."

"I 'on't want none," Hammond told her. "I jes' a-waitin'."

"You jes' plagued," Maggie assured him, encircling his shoulder with her arm. "Needn't be plagued. None of these ladies goin' to hurt you. You ain't used to comin' to places like this; is you? You young, an' sweet. I knows."

Hammond blushed and did not answer the woman. He did not know how to deny the innocence with which the woman had charged him. He felt that perhaps the charge was in part true, but he felt no embarrassment.

He heard a familiar voice and looked up to see the protuberant figure and the florid face of Major Wilkins, who held a man's elbow in his grip. He heard the Major say, "These, these different. These young an' prime. An' cheap, too. Fine lot as ever I see. I goin' to buy two or three of 'em my own self. They ain't a-goin' to las', I tells you, when folks knows about 'em. Better ride out first thing in the mornin', you wantin' to pick 'em over. At the Forks-of-the-Road, Armfield's."

Hammond failed to hear the other man's reply, but he knew that Wilkins was talking of his slaves, a walking advertisement. He saw Redfield approaching, walking briskly until stopped by Major Wilkins, who grabbed him and led him aside. The Major described the slaves awaiting sale at Armfield's and again declared his intention to purchase some of them, this time three or four, for his own use.

"I knows," Redfield told him. "I'm with 'em, don't own 'em, not exactly, but I'm along with 'em; I'm a-sellin' 'em."

"Well, I congratulate you. A fine lot, fine as ever was. I comin' out tomorrer to look 'em over an' buy me a few, quite a few," the Major declared before Redfield could escape from him.

To how many persons Wilkins had told his story Hammond didn't know,

but it would do his sale no harm.

Redfield was satisfied and ready to return to Squires, unable to understand how Hammond could resist the allure of Maggie's wantons. "See that big red-headed one?" he asked enthusiastically as the two made their way along the lightless street. "I'm goin' to try her nex' time. Red-headed ones the very bes'. Coursen, she busy tonight."

"I won'er whut that fat Major mean, tellin' ever'body 'bout our coffle," Hammond changed the subject. "Reckon, come mornin', I got to put a notice in the paper."

When they entered their room in the dark, Redfield stumbled over an unoccupied pallet on the floor at the foot of their bed. "Reckon we goin' to have company," he remarked.

Hammond removed his clothes in the dark, requesting Redfield to help him off with one boot. He withdrew his poke from his pocket and placed his money under his pillow. He went immediately to sleep, but was vaguely disturbed later by somebody coming into the room and going to bed on the pallet. The new guest whispered curses at a servant who was helping him to undress and who subsequently disappeared.

Hammond heard, but didn't open his eyes. After his long ride, despite that the mattress was of lumpy moss, the bed was pleasant and he slept well. The sunshine lay in a long patch on the floor when he awoke. Whether it was the light that roused him or the figure moving about in the room he did not know.

It was a grotesque figure, very black and very fat, bare of leg and foot beneath soiled, brilliant red Zouave trousers. Hammond turned on his side to watch the fat boy, uncertainly familiar, as he fumbled with the brushing of his master's garments. His motions were slow, mere gestures toward his task, with which he seemed little concerned. The morning was cool and the Negro was not exerting himself, but sweat rolled from his brow down his obese cheeks.

Hammond lay considering the improvidence of feeding a servant into a tun, when the boy's identity occurred to him. "Ain't you Shote, Pierce's Shote?" he demanded.

The boy shook his head indifferently. "Not no mo', I ain't. I got me a new masta, suh, an' clothes on an' ever'thin'."

"But you used to be Pierce's? Your name Shote?"

"Yas, suh, Masta. Used to be; ain't no mo'." The boy resumed his brushing. "My new masta feed me good, fatten me up."

From the pallet, which Hammond was unable to see, came the question, "Who you talkin' to, Shote? You don' shut your mouth an' let me sleep, you know whut I goin' to do to you. Larrup you, that whut!"

"Gen'leman in bed ax me, suh. I ain't makin' no noise, suh."

Hammond recognized the voice from the pallet and sprang from his bed. "Charles! Charles Woodford!" he exclaimed. "Ever'body thinkin' you dead!"

The man on the pallet opened his eyes and fixed one of them upon the naked man limping toward him. "Cousin Hammon'," he said. "How you come here?"

"Nev' mind, nev' mind how I come. I found you now. Whure my money? Whure my nigger you stole?"

Charles looked at him blandly. "I never stole your nigger or your money neither. Whut you talks about, Cousin Hammon'?"

"You know whut I talks about—that nigger, that money, that ring."

"Not that Jason whut Cousin Warren give me? Not him, Cousin Ham?"

"Yes, him. Why you go an' stole him?"

"I never. You knowin' I never. You heard Cousin Warren tellin' me he mine an' do with him how I wants. You right there; you hearin' Cousin Warren, your own self." Charles rose on his elbow.

"Papa never meant that, no sich thing, an' you knowin' he never. Whure at your paper fer him?"

"Comin' from a gen'leman, I reckoned I didn't need no paper. Cousin Warren never give me none."

"You knowin' Papa mean Jason yourn while you at Falconhurst. He not yourn to sneak away with."

"He ought to have said. I thinkin' all time he mine—like he say. Too late now," shrugged Charles with the shoulder raised in the air. "I done sol' Jason. I never knowed he weren't mine."

Hammond remembered his father's telling Charles that he might have Jason, presumably for the duration of his visit. He was unable to credit that the boy accepted the Negro as a permanent gift, and yet there was no way to gainsay Charles' contention.

"Well, an' that money?" Hammond went on to the next subject.

"Whut money?"

"That, whut I sent with you to your papa. You never took it."

"Oh, that. I borrowed that offn Papa. It hisn, Papa's; it not yourn. I borrowed that. I'm goin' to pay him back one day—when I kin, handy."

"That my money, an' I wantin' it," declared Hammond impotently.

Charles merely laughed. "It wasn' yourn. You givin' it to me to take to my papa. I jest take it, a borry, offn him, not offn you, an' come to New Orleans. Always did want to go to New Orleans. You don't reckon Papa goin' to do anythin' about it?"

"He goin' to whup you, whup you jest like you was a nigger," threatened Hammond.

"Let him jes' try. I through whuppin'. Through! Hear me? Through!" Charles rose to sitting position in his earnestness, and then reclined, laughing. "He got to kotch me firs', anyways."

Whether Charles had stolen the twenty-five hundred dollars from the Maxwells or from his father was a question open to dispute. It was more of the nature of a breach of trust than a theft, in any event. Even if Ham-

mond had chosen to press the charge, Charles' explanation had taken the wind from his sails. Whose was the money, once it was in Charles' hands, the Maxwells' or Woodford's?

"An' that ring?" Hammond pursued. "Whut 'came of that? I reckon I givin' you that?"

"Hell, no! I got that, got it right here on my finger, an' if I kin git it off. It's growed right tight." Charles struggled with the ring, sucked his finger and twisted the ring loose. He threw it at Hammond's feet. "I was goin' to give that to Blanche whenever I goin' to see her. Reckon you goin' to see her firs'. You take it to her."

Hammond stooped to pick up the ring, satisfied with his recovery of it.

"How she? I reckon you married with her? No way to keep you from," Charles went on. "Reckon you foun' I say true when I tell you she pizen?"

"Yes, we marry. Fergit you not a-knowin'. Blanche, she real well, 'ceptin' she knocked. She goin' to have a chil'."

"No? Blanche? That real interes'in'!" Charles' surprise was not feigned. "I hope it not come gotch-eyed, like me."

Why should the boy consider such a possibility? Hammond disguised his repercussion from the comment.

"How my mamma? Seein' her?" Charles inquired. "Still a-readin' in the Bible, I reckon."

"She well. Leastwise she was, time of the weddin'. Ain't seen her sence that. Dick's took up preachin', let go the law."

"Preacherin' better fer him. Don' have to know nothin' jes' to preach." Charles was little concerned. "Whut fer you come to Natchez? A new wench?"

"I brought a coffle across, me an' Doc Redfield there in bed. They out to the Forks."

"Sellin' good? Niggers up."

"Jest come yestiday. Ain't had time yet."

"They goin' to sell, all right. Ain't no buyers goin' to New Orleans at all. All comin' here. Your niggers ain't even been near New Orleans? They sell. Right comic, how we met right here in the same room."

"Whut you doin' here?"

"Refugeein' from New Orleans. Come up on the packet las' night. Ain't hardly nobody left there, all either dead or gone away. I brought that Shote with me. Remember him out beyond?"

Hammond remembered and commented. "You got him fatter than ever. Too fat."

Charles crawled from his bed and submitted to be dressed by Shote. "Fat as I kin make him," he said, "an' still he don' sell. Money in monsters, if you kin git 'em, but too many jest fat ones. Nobody think fat ones funny no more."

Hammond noted the change that his brother-in-law had undergone. His face had cleared of its pimples and he had put on weight. His flesh was soft,

but his contours had rounded. Except for his eyes, one would have called him handsome, or that he was about to become handsome.

"I bought me a little humpback with skinny legs, funny lookin' imp," Charles continued. "Didn't have to give fer him hardly nothin', hundert an' fifty; sold him to a gam'ler very next day fer five hundert dollar. He usin' him for luck. Then I got a zany half-wit young wench. Didn' know nothin'. Couldn' talk none. Follow me aroun' like a puppy, but couldn't keep no clothes on her. Tear 'em off fast as I could put 'em on. Fellow give her to me. Hadn't had her a week when a man at the Exchange thought she was funny an' offered me three hundert fer her. Wanted her a pet fer his boy. I see they is money in freaks an' monsters, if you kin git 'em. Bethought me of this Shote an' rode across an' bought him. Had to pay too much—three and a quarter fer him. He too old. They wants funny ones young. Oh, I kin git four fifty, five hundert fer him any time, but I wants seven hundert. Ain't he the fattest you ever seen? I laughs jest to look at him." Charles patted Shote's fat rump with pride, with a trace of affection. "Three years younger an' he'd fetch a thousand. Somebody goin' to want him. Better to bring him along than leave him at New Orleans to ketch it an' die."

Hammond got into his clothes and struggled with his boot. "Kin your Shote help me? I gits worse ruther than better, seems like," he said.

"Course, course. He'p Mista Hammond, boy. Do whut he tell you." Charles was accommodating, his old self. He was glad to make his peace.

Dressed, Hammond woke Redfield, who had slept through the conversation. He dressed hurriedly, while Hammond waited.

"That three-ball saplin' of your an' Cousin Warren's, you still got him?" Charles inquired. "I thinkin' lots about him. I kin sell him right good to a steamboat man."

"I got him yet," Hammond replied. "Got him with me, out at the Forks."

"How much you wantin'?"

"I ain't sellin' him to you, nor nothin' else; not till you pays back that money, an' makes that Jason good."

"I thought that all explained an' settled. You ain't holdin' that agin me?" There was hurt in Charles' voice.

"Ain't holdin' agin you, but I don' want no truck with you, even if you is my wife's brother."

"I reckoned you'd want me to help sell off your coffle."

Hammond didn't answer. He would have chosen not to encounter Charles at all, would have chosen to forget him, to charge him off as a cheat and a thief. But the boy's explanation of his behavior was pat enough to raise doubts in Hammond's mind—it was not exactly theft, not theft from the Maxwells. He had returned the ring at least, at the first opportunity.

Charles, having no purpose in Natchez except to escape from New Orleans and its cholera, would have attached himself to Hammond and resumed their relations as if nothing untoward had occurred between them. He waited for

Redfield to get into his clothes and accompanied him and Hammond to the dining room for breakfast. He was Hammond's cousin and brother-in-law, and Hammond was unable to be forthright in shaking him off, despite that he still harbored doubts about Charles' explanation of the Negro and the money. Hammond's treatment of the boy was tepid, but he got rid of him only because Charles had no horse upon which to ride to the Forks-of-the-Road.

Redfield went there directly, whereas Hammond remained in the city to place in the newspapers an announcement of his arrival with a consignment of Negroes for sale and to buy new clothes for the slaves, in which he believed they would appear better to possible buyers. He made haste with his errands and reached Armfield's before ten o'clock. Redfield had ascertained that the slaves had been fed to repletion. They sat on benches before the doors of the sheds with nothing to do but wait for somebody to come and buy them. Their parade through the city had stimulated their interest, but here there was nothing to do but to repose in the sunshine and wait for what should be done to them.

Hammond's arrival animated them and the distribution and fitting of garments excited them.

"Shore you clean?" Hammond demanded as he handed out trousers and shirts and dresses. "Don' want you should put new trogs on dirty!"

"Wash yestiday, Masta, suh," declared Vulcan, "soon as we come."

The novelty of new clothes delighted the Negroes, who ran from one to another showing them off and exchanging garments in the hope of a better fit. Some of the boys cut capers that aroused a laugh from the others, and the merriment among them was considerable. A few of them who had expected to be permitted to amble about the streets in search of buyers for themselves were disappointed at their confinement in a mere barracoon, but they were none the less comfortable and well fed.

Curious neighborhood youths and a few men straggled in to make casual inspection of the merchandise, but none had money to buy.

The newspapers with Hammond's advertisements would not appear before morning, but the owner was already disappointed that the public interest in his slaves was not greater. It was two o'clock before a prospective buyer came.

He was a roughly dressed, stooped young man with a black beard, riding an unkempt, long-haired horse. "Hearin' you got niggers?" he said to the white caretaker as he dismounted awkwardly, although the slaves were in his view.

"They hisn," the caretaker replied, waving the customer in the direction where Hammond was standing. The man approached Hammond and repeated his affirmative question, which the owner admitted to be true. The slaves rose and lined up for inspection as Hammond had taught them.

The man walked down the line, eyeing the lot individually, stopping oc-

casionally to feel of a boy's muscles. "Right likely," he commented of none in particular. "Right likely. 'Ginia or Kaintucky?"

"Alabama," Hammond answered him.

"Right likely," the man repeated, "—comin' from there. Whut's that one? How much?" He pointed toward Vulcan.

"Him?" Hammond hesitated before naming a price. "He eighteen hundert."

"Yes," said Redfield coming up, "an' worth twenty-five of anybody's money."

The man whistled in his alarm at the price.

"Otherns less. He the mos' costive. You shore kin pick a good nigger," said Hammond. "First thing, fallin' on the bes'."

The man examined the other boys and asked their prices, but returned again and again to Vulc. Lute, the cheapest of the adult males was only a thousand dollars. The man asked Vulcan, Pole and two others to remove their shirts, and Hammond told them to strip down naked. They were prime with nothing to conceal, and he was proud of them.

"Purty bucks, an' not a mark on 'em." said the man admiringly, running his hand down the back of one. "But eighteen hunert? Too much. I'd give twelve fifty, roun' about that fer that one. Give you twelve fifty. Whut say?"

Hammond shook his head dubiously and looked at Redfield for counsel.

"That a breedin' buck," said Redfield. "Some of them others jest as good, you goin' to work 'em."

"I only jest got me three wenches, an' they all got bucks. Ain't a-needin' no breeder, but I likes the looks o' that one," hesitated the man.

"I reckon your bucks ain't as good as this one. Give your sluts to him an' he bring you twins—likely. He that strong," suggested Redfield.

The man sighed, convinced but reluctant. "Six months?" he asked.

"Cash," clicked Hammond, positively.

"Well, I ain't got it. Jist ain't got it."

The vendor made no reply.

"Got to go to the bank, I reckon. Bank will 'commodate me. Al'ays have. Keep that 'un fer me; I'm comin' agin." As the buyer walked toward his horse, he met Major Wilkins entering the enclosure.

"Didn' you git none?" asked the Major.

"The bes' he got," the man replied. "I got to go me to the bank though. Don' like it to have to loan."

"I done tol' you they prime. Ain' I right, they prime?"

"They prime, but they high, sky high," the man admitted.

"Niggers up," said the Major. "I goin' to pick me out one or two of these right now."

The man rode away and the Major walked toward Hammond. "Seein' Bryce bin here. I seen him this morning' an' tol' him you here. Reckon he kindly picked 'em over. Hard man to do business with, but right hon'able,

right hon'able. Little farm out here, his pa left him, an' half a dozen niggers; all he's got, but right hon'able."

"He takin' that one an' the bank let him have the money," said Hammond pointing to Vulcan, who was getting into his clothes.

The Major walked toward Vulcan, casually felt of his flesh, and grunted his approval. "This not the one with three balls?" he demanded with evidence of some anxiety.

"No," said Hammond. "That one only a saplin'. How you knowin' one got three balls?"

The Major didn't answer the question. "Which one he?" he demanded. "I got the money; got it right here." He pulled from the top pocket of his trousers a considerable sheaf of currency, riffled it, and restored it to his pocket. "Which one he?"

It was difficult to credit that Major Wilkins was the kind of man to buy an anatomical deformity, and the caretaker was mistaken in his belief that the Major was without means. Hammond called Atrides, who came shuffling and blinking his gray eyes.

"Git outn them trogs an' show yourself to the gen'leman. Show him whut you got," said Hammond, laying his hand on the youth's shoulder. "Ain't much o' nothin' yet, but he'll grow; got good bones fer a saplin'," the owner apologized as Atrides kicked off his breeches.

"I swan if he ain't got 'em! I be damned!" the Major grew enthusiastic, as he felt of the boy's genitals. "Never seen nothin' like it before in my life, never before. All the niggers I've fingered in my time, never before."

Atrides was unembarrassed, pleased, in fact, with the attention of the white stranger.

"He'll grow. He on'y jes' a saplin'," Hammond argued, feeling the scrawny arm of the youth.

"Shore will. Shore," assented the Major. "Clean backed too, not a wale."

"Never flogged," said Hammond. "Kind of a fancy 'cause of them three little chestnuts."

"I should think. I should think," agreed the Major. "Kin he daince? Know any tricks?"

Hammond was forced to admit that he had taught the boy no accomplishments.

"He kin learn. He real quick-like, ketchin' on an' all. You kin learn him," Redfield interposed.

"How much, how much you askin'?"

Hammond hesitated and Redfield answered the Major's question. "Twelve hun'ert; twelve hun'ert dollars. An' we'll git ever' dollar of it."

"Purty steep like, ain't it? One that age?" demurred the Major, handling the boy as if in doubt.

"Don' come three nutted ever' day," argued Redfield. "This one special."

The Major appeared not to hear, looking into the distance through the gate

and seeing nothing. Hammond, knowing the price was too high, had opened his mouth to revise it downward.

"Well," said the Major, "it high, but I knowin' niggers is up. If you cain't see to lessen that price, I cravin' him anyways. Reckon you kin make me a paper. Boy, you mine. How you like that? Put on yo' clothes an' dress yourself. You goin' right along with me on my hoss."

Hammond went to the office and asked the caretaker for a blank form for a bill of sale. The Major and Atrides went along, the Major counting his money as he walked. There was little left in his roll when he had paid for the boy.

"I comin' back to git me two or three more," promised the Major as he rode away, with Atrides astride behind him, waving with one arm and clinging around the Major's ample belly with the other.

"That Major!" said the caretaker. "Whure you reckon he git all that money to buy a nigger with? Whut you reckon he do with it?"

Hammond was well satisfied to be rid of Atrides so easily, so soon, and at such a price; but he was not pleased with making no other sale. Of course, he had Bryce's word that he wanted Vulcan, but no money had changed hands and the sale was not made. Hammond and Redfield sat around the lot for the rest of the afternoon but there were no more serious customers. Men came, four of them altogether, and looked at the slaves, handled them, but only one asked their prices and he only idly.

"Wait fer them newspapers to git to workin'," urged Redfield, who was in no hurry to have the sale over with and return to Benson. "Nobody a-knowin' we here yet awhile."

"Mayhap we better arrange a public cry," Hammond pondered. "They got auctioneers, good ones, in Natchez, like as not."

"They charges," Redfield objected.

"Either that, or take down our prices some."

"Prices all right. Jest that nobody know," Redfield soothed. "On'y bein' here one day——"

"I wants to git started back. I got to go to Briarfield to fin' that mustee," Hammond urged.

"He gone. You done lost him. He movin' North," Redfield shrugged. Receiving no reply, he changed the subject. "I goin' to try that sorrel headed one over at Maggie's tonight, an' I kin git to her."

The slaves had their meal of the day, and the white men mounted their horses to return to Natchez. Hammond was dejected. They were late for supper at Squires, and men were leaving the dining room as they entered it. They passed Charles, who had already eaten and who was giving some order to Shote.

After supper, Hammond, in no mood for fleshpots, went early to bed, whereas Redfield set out again for the saloons, gambling halls and brothels, with which Natchez abounded and which had been augmented by the influx

of refugees from New Orleans. Hammond felt for his purse, which he had placed beneath his pillow, when he later heard Charles bedding himself down upon his pallet; not that he feared that Charles might try to rob him. Charles was mildly repugnant to him, and he would have preferred him elsewhere, but there was no way to rid himself of the boy. Still later in the night, Hammond half heard, half felt, Redfield crawl quietly into the bed beside him.

In the half light of the gloomy morning, he sensed a figure moving in the room and assumed it was Shote making ready for his master's rising. He soon saw that it was not, however. It was Atrides, dressed in a blue uniform with brass buttons.

"Whure you come from? Whut you doin'?" Hammond called to the boy. "How you git here?"

"I 'on't know, suh, Masta. They 'uns done tol' me," Atrides answered vaguely, unaware of just what had happened to him.

"Whure that Major at?" Hammond demanded.

"I 'on't know, suh. I hisn now," answered the boy, pointing toward the sleeping Charles.

It was futile to ask the slave further questions. Hammond lay abed trying to calculate what had occurred. At length he could lie still no longer. He rose and put on his clothes, making deliberate noises to awaken Charles, who opened his eyes.

"Whure you git this 'Trides, here," Hammond demanded.

"I bought that 'un offn you," Charles laughed. "Got me a paper fer him, bill of sale. Not goin' to be caught this time without no bill of sale, an' you a-sayin' I stole him."

"I sol' him to Major Wilkins yestiday," said Hammond.

"Whure you reckon Wilkins gittin' his money to buy niggers?" Charles asked gleefully. "You wou'n't sell him to me; said so your own self. But I bought him, god damn him, an' I goin' to make me some money on him."

"With my own money, you bought him. With money you stole from me. Good as." Hammond modified his indictment.

"Hell no! That money gone long ago! Reckon I ain't got me no money? I been tradin' niggers an' bettin' fights, me an' Mista Brownlee, ever sence I come to New Orleans. I right well fix'."

"Brownlee! You mix up with that snake, Brownlee? Brownlee, the trader?"

"Mista Brownlee right nice gen'leman, you gits to know him. Right shrewd, too. He was, that is."

"Was?" Hammond asked for clarification.

"He dead, you knowin'. The plague got him. Come down one day, dead the next. It like that, the cholrie."

"Mayhap you knowin' Neri, too?"

"Neri, Brownlee's pardner? Course I know him. Gone west, Texas, I reckon, afore Brownlee die. Some trouble or other, over stealin' a nigger. 'Bout bust, I hearin'."

This news, grateful as it was to Hammond, did not console him for the sale of Atrides to Charles. The money was as good as if it had come from another, but Hammond reckoned that it was his own money in any event. He felt that he had given the Negro away.

"This 'Trides? Whut you goin' to do with him? Whut fer you buy him?" Hammond wanted to know.

"He not 'Trides no more. I callin' him Pawn Broker, cause he got three balls out in front. Gen'leman down at the Globe name him las' night."

"But whut fer you buy him? You know bucks like him don' warrant twelve hundert dollars."

"I buy him 'cause you sayin' I cou'n't," Charles gloated. "I show him aroun' some an' sell him agin. I knows a steamboat man likin' freaks, who goin' to want him. I goin' to git me two thousan', mayhap more, fer him."

Hammond had been about to offer to cancel the deal and take Atrides back, in the belief that Charles' sole interest in the boy was to prove to Hammond that he could circumvent Hammond's refusal to sell to him, but when he learned Charles' intention to make a huge profit he kept silent. What did Charles mean by being well fixed? Two Negroes and how much money? Hammond had curiosity but no concept.

There was nothing Hammond could do. He immediately vetoed Redfield's suggestion that they induce Atrides to run away with them.

"Too many niggers runnin' a'ready withoutn us abettin' 'em," Hammond said with indignation. "Make me bad as him. I ain't no nigger-thief! Not yetn!"

"Jes' takin' back your own," argued Redfield.

After breakfast, the two rode to the sales lot and waited. In the late morning, men began to arrive and to look over the stock. None found what he was looking for at a price he could afford. All conceded that the Negroes were a prime and likely lot and that the prices were not too high, but they were prepared to buy adult bucks at only five to seven hundred dollars. They knew slave prices had risen, but they were seeking for bargains and were not too particular about health and stamina.

Hammond and Redfield had gone to Natchez for their dinners and had returned to the Forks, when, nearing two o'clock, two men, apparently brothers and enough alike to be twins, dismounted from sleek thoroughbreds, which they turned to a mounted yellow groom to hold for them. About forty-five, they were expensively but conservatively dressed in black with highly varnished boots. Well made and agile, they swung across the yard and approached Redfield.

"The servants yours, suh?" the slightly taller demanded politely.

"To say true, they hisn. I'm with 'em though," replied Redfield, reluctant to deny ownership.

The man turned to Hammond and said, "They tell me you have some right likely boys for sale, suh, if we aren't too late."

"I reckon they's likely, suh. I ain't seen better, suh. Like to 'spect 'em, suh?" asked Ham, inclining himself in a bow as nearly like the man's as he could muster. This was a gentleman, Hammond could see, and he did not like to concede that he was not. He clapped his hands and called sharply, "Luke! Pole! Lute! Phrensy!"

These boys appeared from the cabins and joined the other slaves in the line-up. "Shuck down, all of ye. Give the gen'leman a look at you," commanded the master.

The Negroes had begun removing their clothes when the stranger intervened with, "Never mind stripping them, suh. I'll ask to see any that interests me, suh."

The master did not countermand his command and the slaves continued to remove their clothes until all stood naked. The buyer walked down the line, glancing at the boys, and grunted his satisfaction with them. "A good lot, the kind I've been looking for," he turned to his brother, and then he addressed the owner, "Yes, suh; a likely lot, suh."

Hammond was pleased with the praise. It was easy to perceive that the man was a connoisseur. "They right good, I reckon. Good as we could raise 'em, my papa an' me. An' biddable. Not a whale on a back in the lot of 'em."

"No difference, that, suh," said the man walking again slowly down the line. "They will do what they're told, never doubt, suh. And clean backs won't last with my drivers. Cain't keep them from using the whip, suh; sometimes too hard. Since I never sell one, a few scars don't hurt. I grow sugar," he explained. He stopped before Lute, reached down and felt of his thigh, pulled him forward out of the line. "That's one," he said. Next he chose Vulcan; when Hammond told him that Vulcan was spoken for, although no deposit had been made on him, the man returned him to the line. Hammond would have sold the boy, if the man had insisted.

"No difference, suh. One about as good as another. All sound and likely," said the man, choosing another. "Two is all I aimed to buy, all I need; but these are so good," he mused, pulling forward two more of the Negroes.

Having tentatively selected four, he went over them carefully looking for possible ruptures, hemorrhoids, broken or crooked fingers and toes, missing teeth. He could find nothing. He ran the boys and told them to jump. He was satisfied.

"Why so many?" asked the brother. "You need only two?"

"Right now, yes!" said the buyer. "But next year, who knows? Don't find this kind every day. All young and sound."

"Cane uses 'em up," admitted the brother.

"Yes, and most growers figure seven years for a nigger. Mine last me about eleven or twelve. I've got one that's been working fifteen year. But he was sound and young to begin. If Papa failed to teach us aught else, he did say, and proved, that it pays to get stout niggers and work 'em hard. Cheap niggers are cheap niggers."

The fraternal colloquy delayed the transaction until the buyer turned to Hammond with, "This four, how much do you want for them?"

Hammond hesitated, adding on his fingers, "I reckon 'em at fifty-four fifty fer the lot," he hazarded at last.

The buyer puffed out his cheeks and expired before he answered, "Niggers are up, I know, suh. Good demand, suh. I suppose your price is all right, figured by the head, and you can get it. But—" he hesitated. "I considered that if I take four they would come a little less—less by the head, that is." There was no disparagement of the stock.

"They worth it, ever' dollar," Redfield interposed and would have said more but for Hammond's interruption.

"I don' know," pondered the owner. "I might, jest might, make it fifty-two fifty fer the lot."

"How about five thousand; twelve fifty a head? I'll give that much, suh." He implied, but did not assert, that he would not give more.

Hammond had made no sale all day and was over-anxious. He paced the lot slowly, head down, considering. He looked up and demanded, "Cash?"

"On the barrel head!" said the man. "I'll give you my check on the Natchez bank and leave the bucks until you cash it. Have to ask you to feed them a few days anyway, until I start home. I live over beyond Baton Rouge and am staying here with my brother."

It was agreed and the principals retired to the little office to exchange the check and the bill of sale. While they were gone, a mulatto who had been lurking at one side approached Redfield respectfully, hat in hand.

"These here all whole bucks, ain't they, suh? You ain't got no house niggers. I needin' me one," he said.

"You house nigger yourself, look like to me," Redfield answered without scorn. "Whut you do with house nigger? Who you buyin' fer?"

"I free, suh," the brown man explained. "We come from Domingo after the revolution there. I needin' a stout yellow boy."

"Got the money?" inquired Redfield without show of interest.

"Yes, suh," affirmed the man, drawing a roll of bills from his pocket that startled the doctor. "I am a refugee from the plague. One of my servants died of cholera and I am forced to replace it."

As contemptuous as Redfield was of free Negroes, he sensed a sale. "Look 'em over, then," he waved toward the naked slaves. "These done sol'. Ought to fin' somethin'."

"These all whole. We cut house niggers, most of 'em, in Louisiana. Ain't you got no cut ones, suh?"

Redfield sat down on a handy keg, more to mark his indifference than to relieve his fatigue. "I kin alter one fer you, any of 'em, an' warrant he live," he proposed. "I'm a doctor, a vetinary nigger doctor, that is."

The free man of color walked down the line, pausing here and there to inspect a slave manually. He returned three times to Phrensy. "How much this

one, Mista white man, please, suh?" he asked.

"That one? That the best we got. That one will cos' you twenty-five hundert dollars."

"Um! um!" said the Negro in his astonishment. "Sure high! That is all cut, safe, an' guarantee?"

"He die, don' cos' you a dollar!" promised the doctor.

"Purty old fer it, ain't he? Other side the river we does it to 'em at about thirteen or fourteen—'fore they knows nothin'."

"Right now bes' time—after they growed," averred Redfield. "Cut 'fore they full ripe, liable to grow out agin, liable to." If the Negro recognized that he was lying, no harm was done in any event.

Phrensy did not follow the conversation and was not alarmed.

Hammond emerged from the office and accompanied the white men to their horses, which he stopped to admire. After that he limped toward where Redfield sat on the keg, pleased with his transaction. "That settle; five thousan' fer four of 'em. Purty good."

"Could a got more, got your full price," argued Redfield.

Hammond saw the Negro man examining Phrensy. "Who that nigger?" he asked. "Whut he doin'?"

"He free," Redfield explained. "Lookin' fer him a buck. Wantin' Phrensy there. I tole him twenty-five hundert."

"Fifteen," Hammond whispered.

"Twenty-five, cut that is, cut and warranted to live. I kin do it fer you my own self. Charge you ten dollars. Not one in fifty dies."

"Whut you meanin', Doc Redfield?" Hammond was indignant. "You ain't carvin' aroun' no nigger of mine—you or anybody. You knowin' whut my papa think about it."

"A thousan' dollars extry," argued the doctor. "Nine hundert an' ninety, that is."

"I not a-carin' how much. That buck is fifteen hundert. That all. If the free nigger want to buy him an' pay his money, he kin do whut he wantin' to with him, cut him or grin' him up fer sausage. Same to me. But me cuttin' him—no."

Doc Redfield shrugged. There was no understanding a man who so casually cast away a thousand dollars.

"Beside," Hammond continued, "free niggers is hard mastas. Don' know how to treat a servant. Ought to all be herded to market an' sol'. A nigger, a nigger. Freein' ain't right. Free niggers—this lan' gittin' to be full o' 'em." He spat in his disgust. "You tryin' to rile me, Doc Redfield, suh? Jest tryin' to rile me—with all yo' talk about cuttin' bucks? Don' know whut has come over you!"

He transferred the anger he felt toward the doctor to the prospective buyer. Striding toward him, with his limp barely perceptible, he grasped the stranger by the shoulder. "Git away from that boy," he ordered. "I ain't sellin'

no buck to no black son-of-a-bitch like you. Ought to be cut an' sol' your own self, some white man's bastard. Now, git away from this jail yard, an' don' never come back. Un'erstan'?"

The Negro did not understand, but he sidled away from Phrensy, released himself from the white man's grasp, and departed without a word.

"Put on your trogs an' git you inside," Hammond said sharply to the remaining slaves. "You," he turned to Lute, "you an' you otherns sol'. Anybody come, you stay in there. Don' crave you aroun' bein' looked at, spilin' a sale. Your new masta come fer you two, three days."

The afternoon was waning, and Redfield was impatient to eat his supper that he might go to the Globe and the Woodbine, later to Maggie's. No more buyers could be expected and, having made sure that his Negroes would be adequately fed, Hammond was ready to return to Squires boarding house. He and Redfield had started across the lot toward the horse-rack, when the little, bearded man arrived to complete his purchase of Vulcan. Hammond had abandoned his belief that the boy had been sold. It was necessary to return to the office, receive the man's money and give him a bill of sale.

When called out for transfer, the big Negro dropped to his knees and grasped Hammond about the legs, weeping. "I knowin' I got to go like Masta say," he blubbered, "on'y Masta so good an' Ol' Masta so good. Won' never have good masta like that agin."

"This gen'leman, your new masta, goin' to be good to you an' you mindin' whut he goin' to say. You do ever'thin' jest like he tellin' you. He feed you good, 'n ever'thin'."

"Yas, suh, Masta, suh," Vulcan agreed.

"Mayhap, you behave, he got a wench or two fer you to take up." Hammond concealed the tears in his own eyes in a show of jocularity as he grasped Vulcan's arm, raised him to his feet and clasped his shoulder in farewell. He watched as the Negro followed his buyer across the lot without a backward glance. The bearded man mounted his small horse, which walked out of the gate, Vulcan trotting easily by its side.

"Well, that all of Vulc," Hammond sighed. "Reckon that man treat him good. Cain't never tell."

"Come on, an' you ready," Redfield suggested. "You got yo' money, ain't you? Whut you carin' whut he do with him?"

The sales for the day had been satisfactory. After supper Hammond went with Redfield down town, swallowed two or three drinks in a crowded bar, but when Redfield decided to sit down to a game of brag, the younger man, unused to late hours, went to the boarding house and to bed. It was late when he felt Redfield slip in and even later when he heard Charles cursing Shote, as the fat black undressed him.

The following morning Hammond had to find the bank to cash the check Mr. Hillhouse had given him the day before for the four slaves. Since he still had the slaves, he had no anxiety about the bank's honoring the check. He

trusted banks not at all and currency but little more, and he took the payment in gold and exchanged for gold the currency he had received for Vulcan. This he had learned from his father, who had seen banks fail and currency fluctuate in its value.

It was late when he reached the Armfield and Franklin barracoon, but Doc Redfield had ridden out earlier. When Hammond at length arrived he found five individuals or parties examining the slaves, all of whom Redfield was trying to serve. The caretaker had come out to help, as best he was able, but he recognized the various men as habitual shoppers who came to look at every coffle that arrived but never bought a slave. It looked like a busy morning, but after examining every slave, inquiring his price, feeling his muscles and running fingers along the teeth, making lewd essays at humor about the pregnancies of the women, the prospective buyers straggled away, one by one.

Hammond saw to it that the slaves were amply fed, after which he and Redfield rode back to Squires for their own dinner. When they returned, they noticed a high-wheeled rattletrap of a buckboard with a heavy-footed, gray gelding standing untied at the hitch-rack. Then they saw a woman following the caretaker toward the slave cabins. The caretaker, whose name Hammond had learned was Charlie Hopkins, stopped and waited. Hammond heard him say to the woman, "Here the owner, comin' now. Let him show 'em. That better."

The woman was squat and fat and big busted, round, flat faced, and rosy blond. Two teeth were missing in the front of her upper jaw, and the remaining ones were small and slime-coated. Her graying hair, straight and stringy, had a green cast, like tarnished brass, and her wide-set, fishy eyes were small and watery green. Her wide frock was of dark gray, and over it she wore an apron of lighter gray. Her men's shoes were heavy, scuffed and dirty, her man's black felt hat battered. She waddled as she came to meet the men.

"You own 'em?" she demanded of Redfield.

"Him, ma'm," Redfield replied, nodding toward Hammond.

"Stout and young," she remarked. "Limp some though. You married I s'pose. Got you a woman?"

Hammond admitted to having a wife. He had appraised the woman, as he appraised all the whites he met, as well as the Negroes; but he was embarrassed at the woman's appraisal of him, as if he were a slave on the auction block. Even more, he was embarrassed by the very presence of a woman in a slave-yard. He didn't know how he should treat her and should have been glad if Redfield had taken her in hand.

"I cravin' me a servant," the woman lisped between her missing teeth, seeming to swallow her words gutterally. "A stout one, an' young, mind you, young. Yaller, none of your stinkin' blacks yet—the whiter the besser."

"Yas, 'em," Hammond led the way. Redfield brought up the rear. Hop-

kins caught Redfield's eye and winked. He tarried within earshot.

"Ain't real light, any of 'em, but they stout like. That is, they stout when they—." Hammond felt a delicacy about mentioning pregnancy to a white woman. "I mean when they theyself. They delicate right now, all on 'em." He summoned the women from the cabins.

"I don' want me no slut," the woman laughed scornfully. "I wants a boy, a stout, yaller boy, growed but young, none of your played out, used up, ol' men."

"Oh, I reckoned—" Hammond halted in his embarrassment. "Fetch Pole, an' them all, Doc Redfield, suh, please, suh."

The boys reported as called and lined up for inspection.

"No, no, no," exclaimed the white woman. "Them black ones I do not want. Besser you should put them away already. I look at this one, an' this one, an' this one."

The quickly chosen three were Phrensy, Napoleon, and a boy called Little One because he was so tall. The others Hammond dismissed and they trudged reluctantly back into the cabins, rejected.

The woman walked around and between the three mulattoes critically, felt of their muscles, reached up to run her worn, broken nailed, soiled fingers over their teeth, threw sticks for them to retrieve, grunted her approval. The slaves had come to relish their examination, knew they were to be sold, and vied among themselves as to which should be first chosen.

Standing back and looking at Hammond, the woman asked, "Vell?"

Hammond knew from her tone that she expected something. "They right good bucks, all right. Which one you likin' best?" he sought her committal.

"I do not know," she said, carefully separating her words. "How kin I jedge? A pig in a poke, I am not buyin' already!" She gestured downward with her hands as if to pantomime slipping from her own clothes to indicate that she wanted to see the slaves denuded.

"Lady wantin' you should shuck 'em down," Redfield interpreted, and the woman nodded.

Hammond felt himself blushing, but summoned the courage to tell the slaves to kick off their clothes, at which they showed no scruples. The woman examining them was of a higher species, white. Cautioned, they knew not why, never to expose their bodies to their mistress at Falconhurst, they felt no modesty in obeying their master in this strange woman's presence, and she no compunction at looking at their nakedness.

"Put away that one," the woman said, indicating the tallest of the boys. She shook her head in disgust. "I knowin' now why you named him Leddle 'Un." She laughed at her own joke, and Redfield slapped his leg in his enjoyment. Hammond's face grew redder, although he was not sure he had rightly interpreted the jest.

"You wantin' a boar, I reckon?" Redfield interposed confidently.

"A barrow I am not wanting yet," the woman countered, scrutinizing and

comparing the merits of the two remaining boys. She ran her hands over their backs and found them clean, forced them to kneel and spread their buttocks, and hefted their genitals contemplatively.

Hammond turned his back, abashed.

Redfield was only amused. "That one the bestest, Mist'ess," he counseled, pointing at Pole. "He older, know his business."

"I likes 'em young a'ready. I learns him," she chuckled. "An' besides, hair he got between his tits. I likes me hair." She grasped Phrensy by the arm and led him forward, scratching her chin and demanding, "This one, how much?"

"Fifteen hundert, either one on 'em," Hammond said, turning toward her in hope that she had finished her scrutiny.

"Ach!" she screamed. "I want not the two of them. How much fer yust one?"

Hammond repeated his price.

"I vill gif half. Seven hundert, how that? That is a goot price," she argued.

Hammond was firm.

"This ain't no common nigger," said Redfield. "He choice an' young an' likely. You cain't buy you no sech buck as that one there fer no seven hundert or a thousan'." The argument was a perfunctory one and was only intended to fill the interlude of the woman's decision.

She turned coy in her wheedling. "I yust a poor vidow. Think of that, yust a poor vidow, all alone. Gentleman, Mister, you had ought to let me have him cheaper—yust a poor vidow, yet."

Hammond wished the woman would go away. He did not deign to answer her plea.

Redfield answered for him, "Mista Maxwell not takin' no less 'n he say. His price, his price, an' you cain't stir him."

"But I pays cash, cash," she emphasized, patting her corsage.

Hammond nodded. "Fifteen hundert dollars, cash."

"So much, I ain't got it, I ain't got it," the woman wrinkled her face as if to weep.

"That too bad," Hammond admitted. "He worth that an' more. Phrensy, take your trogs an' git in that cabin. The white lady ain't got it."

The woman saw that she could not cheapen her purchase and surrendered. "Vell," she said, "if that your price. A poor vidow, tut, tut, tut. If I kin go in a cabin or behin' somethin' to git it out—my money." She disappeared, clutching the bodice, and reappeared with a slender roll of bills, from which she carefully counted fifteen in the denomination of one hundred dollars. She had left at least as much more.

Redfield looked longingly at the money she retained. "You sayin' you ain't got it," he charged her laughingly.

For reply she made a coy gesture toward him, laughing. She grasped Phrensy by the arm and said to him, "Come along, boy, you are mine now,

ain't it? You not sleep on straw no more yet. You sleep in nice feathers yet. An' you eat good, pig an' all."

"You all wantin' a bill," Hammond reminded her.

"Ach, of course. I wasn't fergitting, fer one thousant and five hundart dollar."

She went with Hammond to the office, followed by Phrensy, while Redfield gravitated toward Hopkins. When they emerged from the office, Hammond made no move to follow her to her buckboard. She waddled proudly, helped Phrensy tenderly into the seat, got in beside him, and, picking up the reins, clucked to the lazy horse. Hammond wandered toward Redfield and Hopkins, as the woman turned, driving away, and waved sportively.

Hammond sighed and Hopkins shook his head. "That ain't nothin'," said the latter. "One of them Dutchies in that settlement over across." He waved vaguely westward. "They do anything, them Dutchies."

"She finger them bucks—all over," said Hammond. "You'd think she was a man."

"That one go' to know tonight she ain't no man," Hopkins commented. "Reckon he kin pleasure her? She be back tomorrer an' if he cain't."

The woman's purpose in buying the slave appeared to Hammond, and he blushed deeply.

"He have ever'thing sof', an' got sense, sense an' stren'th, long as he pleasure her good an' love her up," Hopkins speculated. "Fifteen hundert, a lot to pay. I'd do it my own self fer less 'n that, wouldn't you, Mista Redfield, suh?"

"Sure. Sure would, suh. Ain't no worse than my Widder at home. Course, I wouldn't want this one. Ain't followin' up no nigger."

"You gen'lemen wrong," said Hammond. "She white, an' ain't no white lady goin' to pester with no nigger buck. You wrong." The idea of sexual congress of a white female with a Negro male was too horrendous to credit, yet it was too obvious to discard.

Unperturbed, Hopkins remarked, "It common. Them Dutchies, they do anything—an' some other folks, too." The incident was amusing—nothing more.

But it failed to amuse Hammond. "Reckon I could ketch up with her if I ride. Git that nigger back an save that lady? Which way they turn? Did you all look?"

"You cain't ketch her, an' cain't take back the nigger an' if you did," Redfield remonstrated. "He hern now; she paid her money an' got a bill from you."

"Whut difference? Whut fer you het up? Ain't you never pestered a wench? White man an' black wench, black man an' white lady, whut difference?"

"It different. I don' know how, but it different." Hammond was confused.

"Man ain't havin' chil'ren; on'y ladies has chil'ren. I reckon that it, that the difference."

"That ol' Dutchy lady ain't havin' no young no more, by that buck nor by anybody," the doctor declared.

The woman's age consoled the young man but little. He sighed and walked away from the conference. Thinking back over the sale of Phrensy, the woman's intent should have been obvious. Both the other white men had understood her purpose. Damn his own innocence, his stupidity, which had made him a party to such a violation of his racial mores. Even alone, he blushed to believe it true.

CHAPTER 36

AT dinner Hammond couldn't eat. Afterward he accompanied Redfield down town and drank a good deal of corn whiskey over the bars, but he left early and went to bed. He lay awake, obsessed and horrified by the fantasy of the German woman in the black man's arms. Possibly they were naked; a white woman who would submit to the embrace of a Negro slave would be naked—just like a Negro woman with a white man. He saw in his vision the contrast of the blond flesh of the woman and the bronze of the man and the gusto with which the virile brute clutched his taboo pleasure. With what satisfaction would he, himself, plunge a knife into the broad back of the slave as he lay with his willing victim in his swarthy arms.

Redfield came in early, but Hammond feigned sleep and did not talk to him. A little later he heard Charles stirring for bed and getting into his pallet. He finally dropped to sleep. Later he awakened with a pain in his abdomen, which was intermittent, but which grew worse.

It was toward morning, and light was breaking, when he could endure the pain no longer. He nudged Redfield and told him, "I'm sick, Doc Redfield, suh. Cain't you do nothin'?"

"Whure you hurt?" asked the doctor.

"My belly. It achin' me turrible."

"Cain't git no doctor, no real, human doctor this time of night, an' stores ain't open. I didn't bring nothin', no medicine, along. Jest got to stan' it till mornin' breaks, an' I'll git you somethin'."

The boy resigned himself to suffer. Intense pains, each of which he hoped would be the last, swept over his lower abdomen, and he was alternately icy cold and burning with fever. Nauseated, he reached for the chamber pot beneath the bed and tried to vomit. He could only retch. Redfield, on his back, snored complacently beside him. Hammond half dozed between his spasms of pain.

Through the window, he saw Mercury rise and swing slowly upward and at length the east grew red. He again nudged his bedfellow and pleaded, "Doc Redfield, suh, cain't you do nothin'?"

Redfield roused himself and placed his hand on the boy's brow, which he found intensely hot. "Hurtin' yet?" he asked fatuously. "Somethin' you et, pro'ably; that catfish, I reckon. Had ought to be good, this time of year."

Hammond denied having eaten his supper.

"That it; all that corn on your empty guts," diagnosed the doctor.

"Cain't you do somethin'? You could to a nigger. I knows you could."

The doctor piled from his bed reluctantly, and slipped into his clothes. "That store had ought to open up purty quick. I'll git you somepin', some laudanum, I reckon, and castor oil."

"Hurry up, please, suh," urged the sick boy.

Redfield walked around the bed. The light was enough for him to see the glazed glare of the fever burned eyes. He felt the stringy, irregularly rapid pulse and asked Hammond to show his tongue. He threw back the covers and pressed the boy's abdomen and got only grunts. He knew not what he was seeking, but nodded gravely as if he had found it. "Laudanum and castor oil," he muttered under his breath, and aloud sought to encourage the youth. "You jist stopped up. You goin' to git well," he said. "I fetch some medicine, soon as I kin git in to git it."

When he was gone, Charles, who was disturbed by the doctor's rising, got up from his pallet and came to the bed. "Whut wrong, Cousin Hammon'? You ain't sick?" He had but to look at the unblinking eyes.

"Wait," he said, "while I puts on some clothes. It right col', nekid, these mornin's."

"I'm burnin'," Hammond rebutted.

"Keep them quilts up tight. Musn't kotch col'," Charles warned.

He dressed quickly and came again to the bedside. "You got it, you reckon?"

"Whut? I don' know. Whut?" Hammond spoke weakly and without inflection, without interest.

"It! The plague! Cholerie! Sure as you're born! Comes this way, jest like you doin'. Dead afore tomorrow night. Most of 'em dies evenin's late."

Hammond was indifferent.

"Like, me an' ol' Redfield will git it too, sleepin' right with you, same room."

"Doc Redfield say it jest belly ache," breathed Hammond. "But it bad, sure bad."

"He ain't only a hog doctor an' a nigger doctor. He don' know cholerie, how it come on, well one day, dead the nex'. You gotten it, cholerie."

Atrides slipped into the room to help Charles with his clothes, but his master, already dressed, sent him quickly away to avoid the contagion with Hammond's malady. A knock at the door was Royal, the boarding house slave, who had brought two bottles which Redfield had entrusted to him.

"Please, suh, gen'man say tell sick gen'man to swallow these, please, suh. Gen'man say tell he goin' to the Forks; he goin' to slop some niggers he got there," the Negro explained.

Charles turned to Hammond. "See?" he declared. "He know. Redfield know whut ail you. He not comin' back. This medicine ain't goin' to do no good; nothin' won't."

"Mayhap, it ease me some," said Hammond, extending his arm for the bottles. "Got to die, might as well die without this hurtin' I got."

Charles poured out the laudanum, which the sick man swallowed, and followed with castor oil, which he spewed into the chamber pot, and the dose had to be repeated. Charles was visibly frightened, picturing himself ill and dying within the week. He, none the less, went to breakfast, and Ham-

mond felt very lonely, deserted. If only he had brought Ellen, or even Meg! Neither would have left him to die alone. He felt guilty in his need for them. Why should they die of cholera because he had to?

Redfield's failure to bring the medicine, himself, betrayed his belief. He would not come back. What, Hammond wondered, would become of his Negroes—and his money. Would Redfield take the money to Hammond's father? It bothered him even more than the thought of death.

Charles, of course, would not return. One could not expect it of him, after the quarrel they had had. He had escaped from New Orleans only to run into the thing he had fled. Hammond was amazed that the boy had tarried to give him the medicine. One thing about cholera; it was short. He would die and be out of his pain tomorrow. He wished he might shorten the time.

He burned with fever, but the pain was abating. The last two spasms had not been so severe; it was good to hurt less. It was the laudanum that had done it. It was the precious syrup, but it was across the room and he wanted another dose. Had he the strength to get out of bed to get it? It would expose his fever to the chill air. He must keep well covered.

But, after all, what was the difference? He was doomed whether or not he kept well under the quilts. Perhaps by supporting himself against the walls he should be able to reach the table on which the laudanum rested. He would bring the bottle with him to the bed that he might partake of it again whenever the pain grew unbearable. He would have sent to the Forks-of-the-Road for one of his slaves—any of them—if he had had anybody to send.

He had resigned himself to isolation, when Charles unexpectedly returned. He had with him a slave bearing a large japanned tray, but would not permit the servant to come into the room. Instead, he took the tray at the door and carried it to the bed.

"Got to scruge up, if you go to eat this. Cain't swallow it layin' down," Charles said cheerily.

The sick man looked at the heavy meal on the tray—fried ham, eggs, cornbread and butter, grits, and coffee. The sight of it turned his stomach. "Set it down," he said. "Rest it. I cain't eat it now, hurtin' too bad. But ifn you jest fetch me more of that medicine—the first kind—mayhap I goin' to eat later on, mayhap."

Charles poured an ample dose from the laudanum bottle and Ham drank it. "On'y thing 'at seemin' to help," he said. "Leave it here by me. I goin' to crave more of it a'ter you goes."

"I goes? Goes whure? I ain't goin' nowhure. I goin' to set by you an' tend after you. Nobody else ain't goin' to—seem like."

" 'Tain't no use. You cain't do nothin'. I goin' to die," breathed the sick man resignedly.

"I 'spec' you is," the other answered.

"Ain't no use of you a-gittin' it, you an' Redfield. Jest leave me that

laudanum here, right by the bed."

"If I goin' to git it, I done got it. So has Mista Doc Redfield; he sleepin' right with you. Me? I ain't goin'. I goin' to stay an' make you easy. You my cousin, even an' you doesn't like me no more."

Charles paused and Hammond made no comment.

"You ain't wantin' no breakfast, then turn over an' see kin you go to sleep," said Charles, approaching the bed and helping Hammond turn upon his side. "I goin' to hang up my quilt at the window an' keep the light offn you. Don' fret. I be here, right here, an' you goin' to wake up."

The pain had subsided and Hammond was able to fall into a fitful, troubled, feverish sleep, in which he muttered and mumbled, wept and cried out. Charles, more than ever, was sure that it was cholera. All the symptoms were as he had heard that they were. He speculated about how long his brother-in-law might live and about his chances of occupying the bed when he was dead. He doubted that Redfield would consent to occupy it with him. Perhaps he should have it alone for a week until he too should die. He sat still by the bedside and pulled the quilts back around the patient's neck when he sought to throw them off. At noon he slipped quietly from the room and went to dinner, but revealed to nobody that there was a case of cholera in the house. Eating lightly and without appetite, he returned to his bedside vigil. The room with its closed windows smelled of fever.

Early in the afternoon, the patient woke and roused. He had an urge to move his bowels, but was too weak to get from his bed alone. Charles helped him to rise and steadied his body as he sat on the low pot, then helped him, exhausted, back into his bed. Hammond was now without pain, but the exertion of rising had thrown him into a cold sweat.

"I reckon you wantin' a reverend, ain't you? Somebody to pray with?" Charles asked. "Well, one of 'em wouldn't come, an' if he knew whut ail you. I ain't much good at it—prayin'; but I try an' you wants."

"Too late fer prayin', now," replied the sick man, turning on his side and drawing the quilts about his neck. "Don' reckon I needin' it, anyways. I ain't never done nothin' whut wasn't right, nothin' that God kin hol' agin me. Leastwise, not until yestiday, an' I didn't know I was doin' it then. I swear to God, I not knowin'. Don't reckon that angel goin' to write it down in that book, me not a-knowin'."

"Me, I gotten a lot of things on my min'—times I doin' wrong, times I knowin' I doin' wrong when I done 'em. When I die, I goin' to hell, I knows it. Some people jest cut out to go to hell, an I reckon I one." Charles paused, sighed, and then resumed, "Whut you do wrong yestiday?"

"I sol' me a buck yestiday—you remember that big buck, Phrensy, you remember him."

"Well?" The offense to Charles did not appear heinous.

"To a white lady. I not a-knowin' whut she wantin' with him, I swear I

never," Hammond reiterated. "You know whut she aimin' to do? Pleasure with him; that whut."

Charles was amused at the idea, but not shocked. "She purty, that white lady?" he asked.

"Not purty, no, but she white, all white, white as you or me. Course, she Dutch—across the river. I not a-knowin' white ladies like to pleasure. Mayhap, Dutch is different—like wenches."

"Git a price fer the buck?"

"Much as I asted—fifteen hundert, but—"

"Could a got more, knowin' why she wantin' him," Charles said.

"Knowin' whut she wantin' of him, wouldn't have sol' him to her at all. Redfield, he knowed; I didn't." Hammond had risen to prop himself upon his elbow in his excitement. His confession, his denial of knowledge of the woman's intent, relieved him. He felt himself better, asked for a piece of ham, at which he nibbled and gnawed. His fever had subsided. He was free from pain. He knew he was doomed to die, but he felt better. He sprawled on his back and stretched his legs.

"I wonder is Doc Redfield takin' care o' my niggers," he began to worry.

"That whut the nigger say whut brung your medicine," answered Charles. "Nev' min', they all right. An' whut difference anyways? You never a-goin' to know an' after you dead."

"I ain't a-goin' to die. I feelin' me better. Not strong, but better," the patient announced. "Don' they ever git up from that cholerie?"

"Not many of 'em. Few."

"Then I ain't got it at all. Ain't never had it. I gittin' me up, come mornin'."

"Hopin' you right," sighed Charles. "You ain't got it, I ain't a-go' to ketch it."

After an interval of silence, Hammond said, "Right kin', you settin' by me an' lookin' out fer me, 'specially you thinkin' it cholerie. Right kin', after ever'thin', an' all."

"Nothin' else to do, with you my cousin. Couldn' leave you all alone to die," Charles belittled his charity.

"Cain't blame Redfield, not comin' back, thinkin' I got it. Cain't blame him, not bein' no a-kin." In Hammond's very denial there was a show of resentment, but his animosity to Charles was at an end. Charles had more than made up for his theft—if theft it was—of Jason and of the money entrusted to him. Perhaps, Hammond reasoned, the boy had really believed the Negro a gift and had intended to return the money to his father.

Hammond did not feel himself up to going down to supper, but Charles brought him a bowl of soup. Redfield, Charles learned, had not returned to the boarding house for either of his meals. The boys settled to sleep, and when Charles got up to serve his cousin shortly after midnight, Hammond suggested that he join him in the bed.

"He ain't comin'," he argued, laughingly. "Might as well. I ain't got nothin' ketchin' an' it better'n that hard pallet."

Charles acceded to the suggestion, not so much because the bed was softer than the pallet but because the invitation was an earnest of his forgiveness. The previous night it would have been unthinkable.

The following morning, Hammond put on his clothes with Charles' assistance. Shote and Atrides had been warned to stay away.

Hammond had been burned out with fever and was still weak. He insisted, however, upon mounting his horse to go to the Forks to see after his slaves. Charles, more because he wished not to disrupt the renewed friendship than because of Hammond's need for him, rented a horse from the livery stable and went along.

Six of the slaves, four men and two women, were missing. Hammond could not believe that they had run. He went to the office to consult the caretaker.

Hopkins told him, "He, that gen'leman, sold off some of 'em yestiday. I ain't knowin' how many of 'em. It all right, hain't it, me lettin' 'em go? Mista Redfield got your leave to sell 'em?"

Hammond reassured Hopkins. Confident of Redfield's honesty, at least in his relations with him and his father, he was nevertheless relieved to see him ride into the lot. Redfield came forward, embarrassed, amazed to see Hammond.

"I reckoned I better take care o' the varmints," he opined, "seein' you sick. I knowin' you wasn't bad."

"Wasn' nothin'," Hammond minimized his illness. "Cousin Charles here, he set with me."

Redfield detected recrimination in the statement, and turned the subject. "We had a good day. I ridded us of six of 'em—two of 'em wenches."

"I see they gone," nodded Ham. "I believin' nobody goin' to want them females. Git good prices?"

"Thousan' apiece fer the wenches. I ain't chargin' the prices you set. Could o' sol' two otherns, ifn I could o' lowered 'em some." He deliberately saved the best to the last. "You know that 'Poleon? I done right well with that one. Eighteen hundert."

"How come? On'y askin' fifteen. How come?"

"Well, this little ol' man wantin' a good breeder. Said so right straight out. Sol' off all his common bucks; wantin' a good one."

"Not Pole. He ain't no good. You knowin' he ain't got a sucker in him. That the why Papa sellin' him. You know that good an' well. That ain't hones'."

Redfield chuckled at his deception. "That man ain't goin' to know short o' six months. I tol' him Pole had knock all them wenches. He believe it."

Hammond was vexed. "Who is he? Whure at he live at? We find him an' take Pole back agin. We kin tell him you didn't know Pole barren."

"How I know whure he live? Name of Miller; that how the bill of sale made out."

"Miller? They is lots o' Millers."

"You cain't fin' him. Let him go. Take you money," Charles counseled.

"Ain't no other course," sighed Hammond. "Fifteen hundert of it. Pole worth that, but not no more. Doc Redfield here got to keep the rest of it. I ain't havin' it." Thus he salved his conscience.

Redfield demurred, but at Ham's insistence finally acceded. He relished that three hundred dollars, but knew it was a reprimand.

"Ain't nothin' but bad luck, this whole trip," Hammond lamented. "First, that mustee runnin'. Then that white lady buyin' Phrensy—I ought to knowed, on'y I didn't. After that I taken down sick. An' now I cheatin' a white man on a barren buck."

"Leastwise, you ain't gotten the cholerie," said Charles cheerfully. "An' we cousins again," he added.

In the course of the ensuing three days the remaining male slaves were gradually sold. However, there was little interest in the two women, Twinkle and Sheba. A few planters looked at them, none bought. Except that they were not fancies and fit to be concubines, nobody questioned their excellence and few objected to their age. But they remained.

Hopkins analyzed the reason. "This ain't no nigger breedin' country, anyways," he explained. " 'Lessen one got the wenches an' cain't he'p, it cheaper to buy bucks 'ready growed; an' even breedin' 'em, they liable to come sluts. Mista Armfield don' hardly ever buy none up in Virginie to sell down here, not except he gittin' 'em awful cheap."

"Papa say not to bring none of 'em back home. I reckon I got to price 'em less," Hammond concluded.

"You'll git it. Jest wait," argued Redfield, who was enjoying his stay in Natchez and was reluctant to return home.

"Eatin' their heads off, four bits a day, beside whut it costin' fer us down to Squires," Hammond objected.

None the less, he waited. For four days there was no sale and only two or three lookers. Hammond considered offering the women at one of the auctions that were frequently held in downtown Natchez, but Redfield harped on the uncertainty of prices at auctions and the necessity to pay commissions. Twinkle and Sheba, he argued were too good to offer at auction. Only trash required to be sold so.

It was discouraging to wait idly, day after day, for buyers who did not come. Hammond, however, regained the strength his illness had cost him.

One night in a bar, Charles found a drunken man with eight hundred dollars and sold Shote to him. The boy's incredible bulk had aroused the man's befuddled mirth; but, after using him all night as a butt, the buyer the following day sought out Charles and offered to sell Shote back to him at half

of what he had paid. Charles had had enough of the gluttonous monster and refused to take him back. Besides, he had Atrides and was waiting for the steamboat gambler to return down the river and buy him.

At the end of the fourth day of Hammond's discouraging wait without buyers, Major Wilkins dismounted from his horse and strode across the sales lot. "Remember me?" he asked, clapping Hammond heartily on the shoulder. "I the gen'leman whut bought that three ball varmint offn you."

Hammond nodded his remembrance.

"Well, I got me a gen'leman, another gen'leman that is, who wantin' to buy them two wenches. You still got 'em?"

Hammond admitted that he had them.

"Only trouble is this gen'leman ain't got no money, not ready money," the Major continued.

"I wantin' me cash," specified Ham.

"I know, I know," said the Major, undeterred. "Only he ain't got it. He got niggers though, lots of 'em. Thought maybe you trade him—one wench for couple of saplin's, maybe three. He skeared to ask—not wantin' you to think he pore."

Hammond was not enthusiastic, knowing the kind of stock that would probably be offered him. He rose from the keg on which he had been sitting and rubbed his hands lightly together as if dusting them of the idea. "Reckon a trade wouldn't in'erest me," he said. "Might bring 'em in, an' he got a mind. I'll finger 'em over."

"They up in the country—north. I'll ride with you, you an' your pardner. Lookin' never hurt," the Major urged, dropping on the keg Hammond had vacated.

Redfield joined them. "Let's go with the gen'leman, Ham. No good settin' here, jest a-waitin."

"Might as well, I reckon, an' if you think," conceded Hammond.

"One thing!" Wilkins hesitated lest it wreck his project. "I had ought to have somethin', in case you trade, a kin' of—a kin' of whut you call a commission, an honorarium, so to name it."

"I might give you fifty dollars—that is if both o' 'em goes, twenty-five apiece," Ham volunteered. "But I not takin' jest whut offered, understan', jest fer a trade."

"I thinkin' it had ought to be more—about twicet," the old man faltered. "I riskin' my time. It val'able."

"The other man had ought to pay half," countered Ham.

"Oh, he goin' to. He agreed to it. But you, you ought to pay fifty apiece, gittin' yourself shet of them two."

"Well," Hammond stipulated. "Long as I not forced to trade fer somepin' I not a-wantin'. How fur?"

"Fourteen, fifteen, maybe eighteen mile. Jest a nice ride. Do us all good," said the Major.

Charles, on a rented horse, joined the cavalcade that set out upcountry next morning. Where the road would permit, the party rode two and two, the Major and Redfield in front. The weather was crisp and not cold and the landscape was brown. The soil beneath it, however, was deep and black, the road springy beneath the hooves of the horses.

Charles had taken Atrides before him on his horse to Armfield and Franklin's before the party had set out and asked Hopkins to chain him and to feed him until the return.

The journey, longer than anticipated, was not unpleasant. It was closer to twenty-five miles than to the Major's estimated eighteen. The road led between rude shacks and cabins, surrounded by thistles and briars, past pleasant farms and luxurious plantations, their houses set so far from the road as to be just glimpsed through avenues of trees. The persons they met were uniformly cordial, the white riders with a "Howdy, gen'men; fine day!" and the Negroes on foot who removed their hats, if they wore them, in deference to the superior race. All, after they had passed, turned to stare over their shoulders and to speculate whither the quartet might be bound.

"Ain't much further along," Wilkins insisted at every mile after the tenth, knowing he had deceived Hammond about the distance. But, for all the Major's reiteration, nobody was concerned as to how far they might be going.

At length, the Major turned aside into a private road at a break in the worm fence that appeared to serve the purpose of demarcation only. A large house of logs sprawled in the sunshine, entirely surrounded, front, rear, and sides, by drying cotton plants. Not a tree was in sight. Behind the house was an open space, swarming with young Negroes, who disappeared into the row of cabins at the advent of strange men. Two of the more daring stood in the doors and watched. A squat, black woman emerged from one of the cabins and summoned another to help her take care of the visitors' horses.

She was silent until the Major demanded, "Mista Bixby here?"

"He somewhure 'roun' here, suh," she answered unintelligibly. "Mars Johnnie," she called, "Wha' at yo paw? Gen'mens wantin' him."

Johnnie came from the rear of the house, a shock-headed, ragged, white boy of fifteen with white bread, half an inch thick with butter, in his hand and around his mouth. "I do' know wha' he!" he muttered. "Whu' you wants of him?"

"You ain't come, is you, to git our chilern? Mars say how he sellin' off. You ain't the man?" the squat woman asked suspiciously. "You cain't have mine, cain't have 'em, none of 'em."

Hammond reassured her with, "Ain't nobody wantin' nothin' come outn you."

"Annie al'us skeared somebody wantin' her young 'uns. Ever' time anybody come. Ain't you, Annie?" the boy laughed.

"Mars sol' off one," mumbled the woman, leading away the horses.

"Sellin' the otherns, anybody take 'em," taunted Johnnie through a mouth-

ful of bread and butter.

"Who there? Who talkin'?" questioned a voice from the broken-backed barn. An angular man of sixty followed the voice into the sunlight, squinting at its brilliance. "I thought I hearin' white talk," he added, coming forward.

Major Wilkins extended his hand and Mr. Bixby pumped it after wiping his palm on the leg of his pants. "These here are Mista Maxwell an' Mista Redfield an' Mista—Mista Charles. I ain't rememberin' the res' of his name," Wilkins said.

"Woodford," said Charles and was ignored.

"I seen Mista Maxwell up to Armfield's, not to know him though," said the wrinkled Bixby, shaking hands around. His underlid drooped and folded back like a patient Bloodhound's as he waited to know the occasion of the visit.

Major Wilkins explained. "Them two wenches down at Armfield's you wantin'—"

"Who sayin' I wantin' 'em?" countered Bixby, cantankerously.

"Why, you sayin' you own self," affirmed the Major.

"Sayin' I'd like 'em, not that I'd be a-wantin' 'em," corrected Bixby.

"Well, whutever," Wilkins accepted the correction. "Sayin' you wouldn't buy, might trade,"

"Maybe did, maybe did," Bixby acknowledged.

"Well, Mista Maxwell here, he own 'em. Willin' to swap ye."

"I dun' know, I dun' know. You might look 'roun'. See anythin' you might be wantin'," Bixby gestured broadly.

"You said you'd swap chil'ren, two fer one, didn't you?" The Major sought to commit the host.

"Hes, jest hes, no shes. Keepin' the wench chil'ren to breed. Want to build up, git me a start," said the old man. "Got me four families now, not much to look, but they brings young."

Hammond interposed to say that his interest was in young bucks, sound ones only.

The party was joined on its periphery by a blowsy, buxom girl of around thirteen, her pallid gray eyes and sun-bleached hair contrasting with her sun-browned skin. Her sturdy calves and rounding buttocks stung Charles' ever-searching concupiscence; and Bixby, seeing his look and sensing his lust, ordered the girl back into the house.

"Polly mine, my own," the father thought it necessary to explain. "My las', my wife, my third wife that is, die havin' her. Not like Johnnie here. He ain't mine. He jest a step. My wife's. His paw an' ma both dead an' I a-raisin' him. Jest like he mine though." He raised his arm to encircle the boy, who ducked away from him and avoided his embrace.

"Right smart young 'uns—handsome like," Wilkins flattered the father. "Gittin' big enough to be some help."

"They marries off an' leaves, soon as they're growed. Georgie did, my ol'est boy, an' this one will. The girl, though, I go' to try to keep. She innocent yet,

ain't ever been touched," and Bixby looked at Charles.

"Let's be seein' them niggers," Hammond suggested.

"Sure enough," the owner agreed. "Help me scare 'em out of them cabins, Johnnie. Jest the bucks, let be the wench chil'ren."

Out of four of the five cabins, with Johnnie's help, he pulled, drove, and scolded into the open eleven boys ranging from five years to pubescence. Hammond rejected them almost as fast as they appeared. The slave women standing with doors ajar, listening to the parley, clicked shut the doors as rapidly as their brood was dismissed as unfit.

"Got littler ones a plenty. Reckoned you don' want weanlings," Bixby assumed.

Hammond admitted the assumption. He retained for further consideration three of the boys, two dark brown ones, which he estimated to be somewhere between eight and ten years, somewhat younger than he would have preferred, but skeletally straight and well put together even if thin in flesh. The third was a vivid yellow, long-boned youth of perhaps twelve, the oldest of the whole lot, a stalwart, alert child with questioning eyes and thick, everted lips which spread in a grateful smile at the smallest attention. Stripped and handled, the three met Hammond's muster.

"One more," suggested Major Wilkins. "Four young 'uns fer the two wenches."

"No otherns I wantin'. One of the wenches fer these bigges' two," proposed Hammond. "Ain't no othern I'd carry back to my papa. He right choicy about feedin' niggers."

"These three all out of one female," said Bixby. "On'y one to settle. Al'ays have trouble with they mammy—sellin' off a chil'."

"Screams an' kick up a day or two. Wenches fergits quick," Wilkins dismissed the subject.

"How come this one yaller, other two black, comin' from same slut?" asked Redfield. "Mus' ha' bin a white man."

"Georgie, I reckon," Bixby explained. "Least, I whupped Georgie when it come that color. Las' time he leaved me whup him without fightin' back."

Hammond tired of the meaningless chatter and, since no offer of dinner was forthcoming, proposed that the party return to Natchez. "I carry the big one, front of me on Eclipse an' you, Doc Redfiel', kin carry the littler one. You kin have the wench, whichever you cravin', supposin' one ain't sol', whenever you wants her, Mista Bixby. We makes the papers when you come in fer her."

"No, I goin' along, right along with you now," Bixby was unwilling to part with the boys without payment in kind. "Sartain, air ye, none of them otherns won't do?"

Hammond declined to reexamine the boys he had rejected.

"Tell you whut! Whut say we ride by Georgie's," proposed Bixby. "He got a young buck you goin' to like—real Kormantine, purentee. I swap him

a couple of these here you ain't wantin' fer it. We git dinner there; Georgie always got plenty, plenty."

"How fur off this Georgie live?" asked Hammond, who was hungry. The prospect of food interested him more than the Negro boy, in Bixby's enthusiastic description of whom he placed little credence.

"Jest a piece, yander," Bixby minimized the distance.

"Four mile," specified Johnnie.

"Not so fur, not so fur," said Bixby with a look of reproach at the boy.

Wilkins was insistent and the excursion was agreed upon. While the horses were brought, Bixby instructed Johnnie to tell Hattie, presumably their mother, that he had taken the boys with him to Georgie's. "Don' tell her I sellin' 'em," he cautioned. "No good her seein' 'em agin. She goin' to reckon they at Georgie's. After while, I tell her they all die—cholery or sumpin."

Bixby rode ahead on a heavy footed roan. Spreading his arm over his domain, he turned in his saddle to explain. "Got the boys pickin' the las' cotton. Jes' a few late bolls they missin' before, but might as well have 'em. Crop bad, not worth nothin', noway. I reckon my seed about run out."

The Negro men could be seen bobbing lazily among the drying plants.

"Still a-plantin' Tennessee Brown," Hammond noticed. "Ever'body turnin' to Petit Gulf. It best. I sen' you a peck of Gulf seed, first chance. Plant it fer a change," he called over the clatter of hooves.

"I bin a-hearin'," Bixby expressed his thanks.

They had gone only a little more than a mile when a rider overtook them at breakneck speed. It turned out to be Johnnie, riding bareback. An argument ensued between him and his stepfather about whether he should be permitted to go along, but it was settled in the boy's favor and he joined the company. Johnnie adored Georgie and Georgie's wife and would have liked to live with them.

When they were in sight of their destination, the boy whipped up his horse and hurried ahead, whooping at the top of his lungs to announce their coming. George stood in his cabin door, awaiting them, a grinning, tall, sinewy, green eyed blond in his late twenties, a hound beside him, wagging a welcome.

"Git down, git down," he called, coming forward hospitably to help the riders tie their bridles to the low trees beside the house. "Ain't room in my little barn. Howdy, Pappy. How Polly?"

"Thought Clarie might give the gen'lemen their dinner," said Bixby.

"Ain't you all et yet? One o'clock, nigh on," Georgie speculated, looking at the sun. "Of course, of course. We all et, but reckon Clarie kin clutter together somethin', an' it only pone an' clabber."

"I reckon I kin," said Clarie, with two shy, small daughters peeking bashfully from her skirts to which they clung. "Won' be much."

The interior of the cabin belied its outside. A single large room had a crude fireplace in one end, and a small lean-to served as a food-storage kitchen, but

all was clean and neat. The fire burned low, but Mamie, a meager shanked Negro woman summoned from the lone slave hut, stirred it into brilliance and fried fat bacon. Mamie shuffled with rolling waddle, to accommodate her vast protuberance of buttocks which surmounted her fragile legs, between the fireplace and pantry, mumbling to herself her every gesture before she made it.

Waiting for the meal to be prepared, the elder Bixby explained to Georgie the purpose of the visit and proposed to exchange any two slave children he might have for Georgie's black boy if Hammond should want him. "All one," the old man argued. "You heir 'em all anyways, you an' Polly, when I go to die. Cain't live long now; I sixty, 'bout that." His play upon his son's sympathy for his age was aforethought.

But it was unnecessary. Georgie's nature was such as not to deny anybody anything he could provide. His father might have his black boy if he wanted him. "I been a-thinkin' I better take that Willie down to Natchez an' see whut I could do with him. Gittin' so big-like, I skeared to leave Clarie an' my baby gals while I goin' to market. Nothin' ain't happen yet awhile, but I al'ays tellin' Clarie to stay in the cabin outn his way. You kin take him along, you wantin' him."

Hammond was more interested in the dinner Mamie was cooking than he was in trading for the slave. When it was ready—bacon, grits, pone and clabber—the men drew to the table the chairs and kegs upon which they were sitting. Georgie did not eat but occupied a place at the head of the table. Meager as the collation was, the guests knew it was the best the house afforded and ate ravenously. Johnnie ate as if he had forgotten his mid-morning bread and butter. The gentlemen, when they had finished, pushed back their plates politely to signify that they had had enough, and Major Wilkins belched his repletion.

Georgie remembered the young slaves left with the horses and told Mamie to throw them the broken food. He whispered to Clarie to get out of the house with her small daughters because he wanted to bring Willie in for examination.

The moment the black boy appeared, Hammond knew that he wanted him. High headed and confident to the point of brashness, Willie strode to the center of the room, rolling his black eyes and showing his ivory teeth. As tall as Johnnie, he was considerably younger—perhaps thirteen. He undulated when he walked, sure of his strength, and the play of his muscles rippled through the rags he wore.

Hammond grunted noncommittally.

"Unlessn you doesn't like 'em so black," suggested Bixby. "He Kormantine, purentee Kormantine, that is he bred Kormantine, whut the man say I gotten him from."

"Kormantine!" scoffed Redfield. "Folks always talkin' Kormantine! Ain't no sich tribe. Kormantine jest a factory. Kormantine meanin' anythin'; Ash-

anti, Hausa, Krew, Wydah, anythin'." Hammond had heard his father say the same thing.

"Anyway, he good—a likely han', goin' to be," said the Major, eager for the trade. "Feel them flanks, feel them teeth," and he suited the action to the suggestion.

Willie relished being the cynosure. He raised his leg and slapped his own thigh, spread his mouth with his fingers and turned in the center of the room for all to see. He did not sense the purpose of exhibiting him.

"He make a fighter," Charles whispered to Hammond.

"He do, I reckon, an' he shuck down good," Hammond admitted.

Georgie commanded Willie to strip, and helped him in the process. Naked, the boy appeared even larger, heavier thewed, more vital than when clothed, but Hammond noticed livid stripes on the black legs and rose to run his hands over them.

Foreseeing the objections Hammond was about to make, Georgie sought to forestall them. "That ain't nothin', nothin' at all," he chuckled. "On'y jest whure I buggy-whippin' him day afore yestiday. Ain't a-knowin' I fetched blood—jest with a buggy-whip. Wouldn't think it could of. Healin' right up. Didn't hurt none."

Willie rolled his eyes in resentment toward his master. "Never hurt you. You laff. It hurtin' me. It still hurt." And when Georgie ignored what he said, he rubbed his leg and repeated, "It still hurt, Mars."

"Whut you whup him fer? Whut he do, Georgie?" asked Johnnie, who had missed the ceremony which he would have enjoyed seeing.

"Same thing Papa lambaste you fer las' week. You remember? Playin', alone; that whut," Georgie enlightened his brother, who was ashamed to the point of silence.

"I whup you fer it too, Johnnie's age, many the time," the father interpolated. "Not a-wantin' you to be weak-minded."

"All boys does it, white an' colored," the Major dismissed the subject. "Don't hurt niggers none. They all crazy anyways, borned crazy. Baboons, baboons shaved down, baboons without no hair."

As if to prove this thesis, Willie jumped for the beam that spanned the cabin, grabbed it, and skinned-the-cat in his exuberance, forgetful of the pain he had protested still beset him.

"Kind of alecky-like," said Hammond, considering the Negro, "talkin' back an' jumpin' jackin' aroun'."

"I reckon he spoil some, me not havin' many," Georgie conceded. "But buggy-whip cure that smart-alecky actin'. Jes' show it to him, don' got to use it. Jes' show it. That ca'm him down."

"Naw, suh, Mars; ain't needin' no buggy whip. Ain't goin' to do it no more."

"Whut say, Mista Maxwell?" asked Wilkins, impatient for his commission.

"I say a'ready he do," Hammond nodded. "On'y I stayin' fer Mista Bixby

to say how much boot he givin'."

"Not a dollar, not a god damn cent," protested Bixby, rising and walking the floor. "Right is, I collectin' boot, not a-givin' any. That wench of yourn a-costin' me three of 'em, the way things is. Money don't sprout on cotton bushes—not this year. Boot had ought to be on other foot."

Hammond had not expected to collect boot, but there was no harm in proposing it. He feared that if he failed to demand it, Bixby would ask it from him. He knew when he saw the sturdy boy that he wanted him. The black was the kind the elder Maxwell would approve and consider to be worth the food to develop into a field hand, for which in five or six years he should be able to obtain fifteen hundred or, if very lucky, two thousand dollars. In the back of Hammond's mind was the necessity to pay Wilkins, however.

With no intention of leaving without the boy, Hammond arose from his chair and picked up his hat. Georgie drew his father into one corner for conference. Redfield and Charles got to their feet. Wilkins made a final effort. Grasping Willie by the arm and stroking his buttocks, he pressed him toward Hammond. "You goin' to have your regrets," he argued. "Don' take him along, goin' to have regrets. Bes' piece o' young black meat in Mis'sippi. Jes' look at them shoul'ers, an' arms, an' flanks." He struck each of the parts as he mentioned it to show the soundness of its flesh.

Bixby nodded to Georgie and came forward from the corner. "Georgie wantin' me to do it, on account of Clarie an' his little gals. He puttin' up half. I tell you whut. I give you fifty dollars extrie, jest to satisfy Georgie. Whut say?"

"Well, I reckon I might as well," Hammond conceded. "Had ought to have a hundert, but boot is boot. I'll take him along. When you come fer your wenches? I like to start back tomorrer."

"Go right with you now. Good time as any. Git your hoss, Georgie, an' you goin' along. I got to stop by though an' git my money—if you still askin' it."

"Hurry up, put on them clothes of yourn. You goin', too," Georgie told Willie.

The bewildered boy, who had understood nothing of the transaction, asked, "Me goin'? Whure me goin', Mars Georgie? Whure me goin'?"

"Nev' min'," was all the answer he got.

While Georgie went for his horse, the other gentlemen filed out, untied their horses and mounted them. Hammond took up the yellow boy behind his saddle, Redfield one of the smaller blacks and Georgie the other. It was decided that Willie should ride with Johnnie on the big saddleless plow horse, since Johnnie was the lightest among the whites and Willie the heaviest of the slaves, thus equalizing the loads of the horses as much as was possible.

As the horses passed into the main road and turned south at an easy canter, the riders paired two and two, leaving Johnnie and Willie to bring up the rear. "Whure we all goin', Mars Johnnie?" Willie asked, hugging Johnnie to keep

from falling. "I goin' to ol' Mars? I goin' to live with you?"

"You sol'; don' you un'erstan'? You sol'," Johnnie enlightened him. "Georgie done sol' you, Papa an' Georgie. White man jes' buy you offn us."

"Whure we headin'? Whut that white man go to do? I ain't goin'. Let me git down offn this here hoss, Mars Johnnie," Willie begged, in full knowledge that he should be unable to escape his fate. "Whut you reckon he do with me?"

"I don' know," shrugged Johnnie. "Go to feed you to his hawgs, I reckon. Whut gen'mans does with niggers, 'specially young buck niggers."

The threat implied in Johnnie's answer reassured Willie, who was confident that white men did not feed Negro boys to hogs. White men were unpredictable, he knew; but not that, they wouldn't do that. Johnnie was just trying to frighten him, he knew. Still uneasy, he felt better. Bought by Bixby as a small child, before he could remember, and given to Georgie at Georgie's marriage, there was nobody except Clarie—and perhaps Johnnie a little—he regretted leaving. Possibly, if he found conditions not to his liking, he would watch his chance to run away and return to Georgie. How big a world it was! Could he ever find his way back?

Then they came in sight of Bixby's farm, and Willie knew where he was. He remembered that he had been here, had grown up here. The white man could not take him much further—there was no place much further away from Georgie's. He could easily come back.

"Ride ahead! Don' stop! I jest fetchin' my poke to pay off you all. I'll ketch up. Don' hender! Ride ahead!" called Bixby, turning in the lane at the broken fence.

It was mid-afternoon and the men intended to reach Natchez before nightfall. They rode on, slackening their pace to wait for Bixby, who soon rejoined them at a rapid trot.

"That ol' one, that Hattie, sure carryin' on, raisin' ol' Ned," he laughed hollowly. "I tol' her I jest takin' them boys to you, Georgie. I reckon she wary I lyin' to her. Don' let on none, an' we gits back home. An' Johnnie, you tellin' Hattie the truth, I goin' to larrup you. Mind?"

"Hattie jest a little hypoed, I reckon, losin' all them three to oncet," Georgie shook his head. "She git over in a few days."

"She don', an' I goin' to give her somepin' to be hypo 'bout," Bixby threatened.

"Had ought to take 'em away gradual-like, a little at a time. Way ol' man Maxwell do it. Ain't it, Hammon'?" Redfield asked for confirmation.

Hammond admitted it was true. "Mos' in generally, we gits 'em out of the cabins away from they mammies an' barn 'em early," he said. "Course, we never sells 'em off till they growed—'lessen they crooked or puny or somethin'. Don' part 'em much."

Nobody cared. It was just chatter, like most human colloquy, a mere avoidance of embarrassing silence.

Bixby, with his expansive gestures, pointed out the largest of the plantations to the strangers, named their owners, and commented upon their comparative affluence. Wilkins boasted of his acquaintance with these gentlemen and referred to them by their first names. There was talk of cane and cotton and the profits from each, of good land to be had further west, as far as Texas, of the epidemic of cholera in New Orleans and the resultant influx of refugees to Natchez. Prices of everything had risen, and Jackson was blamed, despite the recently come news of his probable reelection.

The sun had set before the cavalcade rode into Armfield and Franklin's yard at the Forks-of-the-Road. The tired horses were glad to be relieved of their burdens.

Hopkins came to meet them and told Hammond, "A letter from Mista Armfield jest come, tellin' as how Mista Franklin on his way, fetchin' a coffle, way of the trail. Hates to put you out, but got to have the room. Don' know how many he fetchin'."

"Mornin', suh. Mornin'. I gits 'em all out come mornin'," Hammond promised. "Jus' sol' me them las' two."

"Ain't no hurry like that; three, four, five days all right. Mista Franklin come slow an' easy like, restin' the boys along," Hopkins explained.

Hammond and Bixby went into the office to exchange bills of sale and to collect and pay the boot. Major Wilkins hovered outside the door that the principals should not escape without paying him his commission on the trade. When they emerged, he stopped Bixby and engaged him earnestly, but seemed disgruntled, Redfield noticed, with the results of the conference.

Hopkins said that Sheba and Twinkle had been fed and were abed. He had also given Charles' boy his supper. Hammond roused the women and turned them over to their new owner, who, despite Johnnie's protest, planned to return home the same night. Quarters in Natchez were expensive and, anyway, unavailable, he explained to the boy. "Unlessen you wants to sleep here in a cabin with Mista Maxwell's little darkies," he said.

Johnnie was willing, provided Georgie stayed with him, but Bixby decreed the return. Hammond tucked Sheba's skirt and helped her to mount behind Bixby, and then put Twinkle up behind Georgie. The one was in tears at parting from her former master, the other, no less moved, giggled hysterically.

"Better ride slow," Hammond advised Bixby. "You don' wants to lose them suckers they's carryin'."

"We go easy," Georgie assured him. "Even takin' to midnight. Better lock up that Willie. Not a-trustin' him to not run, he gittin' so big-like."

"He gittin' away, you know whure he gone—home, that whure. The littler ones all right. They not run," Bixby said as he rode away.

The three brothers were complacent, but hungry, notwithstanding that the stew Hopkins brought them was cold. Willie could not eat despite his fatigue and his empty stomach.

Atrides was delighted to see Charles and to be released from his shackles.

Hammond, locking Willie with the anklet, saw to it that the chain was long enough to enable him to lie comfortably in the straw and tucked him into a ragged blanket.

Willie was whimpering by now. "No! No! Mars White Man," he cried. "You ain't leavin' me here, all 'lone!" He jerked at the substantial chain on his leg.

"These otherns be here with you. They ain't cryin'; look!" Hammond wheedled the black boy. "You be all right, soon as you asleep." With the boot of his crippled leg he rocked the recumbent Willie with what amounted to tenderness.

"You ain't a-goin' to feed me to them hogs, is you, like Mars Johnnie say you is? Is you, White Man?" Willie sought reassurance.

" 'Lessen you says 'Masta, suh,' I is. I sure is," Hammond threatened with a laugh that reassured the weeping stripling. "Now you go sleep, all of you. Lay down, you otherns, there by that biggern, an keep you right warm together." Going out, he closed the heavy door of the windowless cabin and inserted a stick in the hasp. The children were put away for the night.

Wilkins remained to be paid, and Hammond reluctantly counted out the money, the fifty dollars in currency he had obtained from Bixby and fifty in gold.

"That other man, that Bixby there, he never pay me," complained Wilkins, pocketing Hammond's money. "Never see it, I 'spect." None the less, he was cheerful with the hundred dollars and insisted that the party join him in a drink when it should reach Natchez.

The saloons were crowded, and there was difficulty in finding places at the bar. Each of the white men bought a round of drinks, and Wilkins proposed another but Hammond declined it. After his third drink, Charles ordered Atrides to open his pants to exhibit his anomaly to any who cared to examine it. Many men were interested and the boy was the butt of lewd jokes which he laughed at without understanding. A white man wanted to buy Atrides a drink, which Charles would not permit, even if the bartender had not declared that he would not serve a Negro.

It was to be Redfield's last night in Natchez and he was determined to make the most of it. He and Wilkins left Hammond and Charles, who were tired, and returned, after taking Charles' horse back to the livery stable, to Squires for supper and bed. The soggy supper was reheated for them, but they ate with gusto after their day's fatigue and after the drinks they had had.

"Whyn't you come along?" Hammond proposed to his reestablished kinsman. "Stop off at Falconhurst, then when you tired go home to Crowfoot. Your mamma right uneasy-like, thinkin' you dead."

"Let 'em think it. Don't tell you seein' me, not even Blanche. She blab. You cain't trus' her," Charles said with bitterness. "Tell Cousin Warren, you wants; he right nice, him an' you."

"You not a-wantin' me, I not tell," Hammond promised. "But you wel-

come to Falconhurst, 'specially after settin' with me, reckonin' cholerie whut ail me."

"Besides," added Charles, "that steamship man ain't come. I goin' to sell him that three-ball brique. He goin' to crave him sure, an' he ain't bust on the trip down river."

"You pay me too much fer that nigger. I not know I sellin' him to you," Hammond confessed.

"You sayin' you wouldn't sell to me, wouldn't trade or have anything to do with me. I show you I ain't pizen. I sell him. I sell him an' make me money."

They went to bed, Charles on his pallet.

It was past midnight when Redfield came in, undressed quietly, and got into bed at Hammond's side. He lay a full minute and nudged Ham into partial consciousness. "Whyn't we stay—jest a spell, jest a few days longer?" he demanded plaintively. "I jest now gittin' acquainted."

Hammond grunted a reply.

"I had that sorrel at Maggie's tonight," the older man continued, but unheard. "After her, kind of hard pilin' in bed with the Widder."

CHAPTER 37

IT was raining when Hammond awoke. He lay awhile listening to the patter on the shingles, speculated about the wisdom of setting out in the wet day, itemized, thumb against successive finger-ends, the details to which he must attend before the journey could get under way. He arose and limped to the window for a look at the weather. He had no concern about exposing himself or Redfield, but what might a wetting do to those four young slaves? Might it give them lung fever?

He was uneasy at the delay, had spent four vacuous days in selling the two last wenches, when he could better have been scouring the country for that escaped mustee. When he reached Falconhurst, it would only mean that he must set out again to search, probably in vain, for the lost boy.

But the responsibility would be at an end. He had discharged it to what was sure to be his father's satisfaction. True, he would have to endure his father's censure, expressed in cackling laughter, of the mishaps—the running of the mustee, the sale of the sterile Napoleon as a stallion, and, worst of all, the sale of Phrensy to a white woman to slake her lust. He blushed when he thought of it and wished he could expunge it from his conscience. The old man would take no glee at the son's illness, however; possibly that might curb his amusement at the boy's blunders.

Over against the bad judgment with which Hammond charged himself, he set the heavy bag of gold—almost twenty-three thousand dollars; he was not sure just how much—he would lay at his father's feet, and, what the elder would value even more, the young flesh to replenish the stock at Falconhurst. The purpose of the expedition had been to take a crop to market and that he had accomplished. While he had not started out with the purpose of buying slaves, likely, sound, young male Negroes to fill depleted ranks were hard to come by and the four he had acquired would grow in value every year, whereas the females he had bartered for them would soon cease to breed and so depreciate steadily. On the whole, he had done well.

He put on his clothes, and Charles got up and helped him with his boot.

He had promised Blanche to bring her something from the city. What? Garments she could not wear in her pregnancy? After breakfast, he set out in the rain to buy some gimcrack—anything. He was not interested. A ring? He had for her the ring with diamond that Charles had returned to him.

At the most lavish jewelry shop, Wineberg's, he encountered pendant earrings, round disks gaudily encrusted with garnets. That would please a woman. He bought them, and, buying them, thought how pretty they would look against Ellen's duskiness, how barbaric. Jewels on a Negro, he knew, were wasted, but how pleased Ellen would be! She demanded nothing, expected nothing! But earrings would set her apart, brand her as his own. On a wanton whim, he bought a second pair exactly like the first.

Not as a present, rather as a utility, he acquired for his father an open litter, such as the one in which he had seen an invalid going about the streets, carried on the shoulders of two Negroes. It would enable the rheumatic to traverse the plantation and take a more active part in its management. The stores where Hammond inquired for the article he was unable to name understood his description well enough but had no such thing in stock and shunted the purchaser from place to place. At length he learned of a man, now dead, who had ridden in a litter, no longer in use, and its owner's heir was happy to give it to anybody who could find a use for it. Stored in a stable, the bed was faded and covered with dust and chaff, and the frame was somewhat sprung, but the pieces fitted together well enough and it was usable if not beautiful. Hammond would much have preferred to pay for the contraption and was embarrassed by the donor's generosity. The transaction ended with Hammond's fulsome declaration of his undying gratitude and his invitation that the generous man should come to Falconhurst and see his gift in use.

The rain had abated to a drizzle. Hammond, against Doc Redfield's counsel and Charles' wish, decided to make for home. They ate their final dinner at Squires, relinquished their room to Charles, and paid their score. At Armfield's they found that Hopkins had opened the door of the cabin and fed the children. Willie was still chained by the ankle, but the three brothers played together in the open area. Hammond asked Hopkins for a bill for the keep of the slaves, and while he prepared it, Hammond harnessed the mule to the surrey with the help of the crippled Negro, whom, Hopkins said, he was unable to sell.

The bill Hopkins rendered, engrossed on yellow paper in a meticulous, steel-plate chirography, was larger than Hammond had anticipated, but it was carefully itemized and Hammond could find no error. He paid it grudgingly.

"Mayhap I better take me along a pair of spancels fer this nigger nights," Hammond said as he released Willie. "Reckon you could spare a pair? Or has I got to stop at a hardware?"

"I got plenty. Always keep plenty," said Hopkins. "You kin have that 'un you jest taken offn him. It fit an' the key work good."

Hammond paid him the two dollars he asked, threw the fetters in the back seat of the carriage, and placed the key in his pocket.

"Git in," Hammond told the children. "Big ones in front to drive, an' if ol' mule need drivin'." They obeyed and Willie took the reins.

"That, whut I tellin' las' evenin' 'bout Mista Franklin, I wasn't meanin' you gotten to go today. He not comin' so soon," Hopkins apologized in his fear that his warning had prompted the departure.

"Don' fret," Hammond reassured him. "Aimin' to git out anyways, soon as we able. Squandered time, now, over them two wenches."

"I right sad you goin', jest when I gittin' to know you right good."

"Yes," Redfield said accusingly. "It always 'hurrah, hurrah,' with Mista Maxwell. Cain't waste a day or two or three."

Hammond raised his arm in farewell, and the procession moved out of the yard, Hammond leading, followed by the mule-drawn surrey, and last by Redfield. The four small slaves offered a contrast to the stalwart hands with which they had arrived. They had yet to see Charles to tell him good-bye and must, anyway, go to Natchez to pick up the hammock litter.

No consideration had been given to how the frame of the hammock should be transported. It was easy to see that the top of the surrey was too fragile to support it; tied to the side, it would interfere with the high wheels; a gift accepted, it could not be left behind. Redfield, struggling with one end of the clumsy contrivance, relinquished his hold on it, breathed heavily, and suggested, "Let them two biggerns tote it. They big enough. Ain't heavy. Only way."

Hammond looked at the youths in the carriage and then at the hammock frame. "Reckon they could," he admitted. "Slowin' us though. Wushed I'd never seen it."

"Be right nice fer your paw. Git him around."

"Who goin' to drive that mule?"

"He don' need drivin'. He goin' to foller. That bigger little one kin hold the lines," Redfield said.

"Cain't jest hitch it on an' drag it after," remarked Hammond. "Git down, git down," he told the boys. "We goin' to try it."

The empty litter was not heavy, but the boys' shoulders, especially those of the yellow boy, were too narrow to support the braces, which had to be held in place with the hands. The hammock sagged within half a foot of the ground.

"It got to do," Hammond conceded. "Right plagued, though, goin' right through Natchez this a-way. Start a-goin'."

Willie was pleased at being utilized. He set out running at such a pace that the yellow boy at the rear could hardly keep up with him. The two were out of step and the empty hammock swung wildly. Hammond, following, slowed them down to a gentle trot and showed them how to fall into step. Redfield on his dun gelding led the mule by its bridle; the small boy in the front seat of the surrey held the lines and tried to drive. The bizarre procession excited stares of curiosity as it moved through the slimy streets of wet dust churned into mud.

It halted before the Woodbine Saloon, where Charles had promised to wait.

Charles disengaged himself from the broadcloth coated, mustached dandy with whom he was talking, and as he came toward Hammond and Redfield said in a loud whisper, "That him, the steamboat man I tellin' 'bout. Jes' got in, this mornin'. He wantin' him all right, only won't believe it, won' believe his own eyes. We carryin' that brique to the doctor to ast him is them three

knockers on him real, nat'al." He was more concerned with his sale than with his cousin's departure.

"They nat'al as my two," laughed Hammond, throwing a coin on the bar for a hasty stirrup cup.

"Don't tell all them, you know, my folks an' Blanche, nothin' 'bout seein' me. You say oncet you ain't goin'; you promised," Charles reminded Hammond, who renewed his pledge.

Redfield proposed one more drink, which Hammond refused. "We losin' time," he said.

Charles walked to the door and out onto the uneven brick sidewalk to watch them mount. He shook Redfield's hand and held Hammond's a full minute, patting his shoulder.

"Whyn't you carry that big buck of yourn acrost? Course, after cholerie is out of the city. I knows four or five fightin' gen'lemen down the river whut got niggers, good niggers. I makin' a match fer yourn any time, any time at all."

"You meanin' my Mandingo?" asked Hammond.

"Yeh, that Mandingo, or whut you call him," Charles specified.

Hammond made no reply He motioned the boys with the empty litter into action. Redfield led the mule for a hundred yards and when he dropped the bridle the mule trudged after him.

It was plain that the progress could be no faster than the boys could trot with the litter on their shoulders, and Hammond resigned to it, for he would not leave the hammock behind. Redfield was in no haste, and the pace suited the old mule well. The slogging over the rough roads and the necessity to keep in step bored the boys more than it tired them physically. Each few miles, Hammond permitted them to sit by the roadside and rest. The ten-year-old boy held the reins over the mule and pretended to drive it, although it required no guidance.

The youngest boy sat alone in the rear of the surrey, humming an amorphous, plaintive tune until he went to sleep. Waking, he grew petulant and, half-whimpering, called out, "I wants my mammy! Whure mammy? We goin' to my mammy?"

"We-uns sol'. Cain't have mammy no more," his elder brother sought to explain to him. "We goin' with new masta. That white man on hoss there. He our new masta now."

The boy persisted and Hammond ignored the plaint for an hour or two, but when it did not cease, he drew his horse alongside the surrey and sought to pacify the child. "We goin' home," he consoled in a kindly voice. "I goin' to be good to you, feed you good an' all. You goin' to have lots of little niggers to play."

"I wan's my mammy," pouted the urchin.

"You cain't have your ol' mammy. She back behint. See that Willie, that black 'un up there totin' that hammock bed? He goin' to be your new mammy.

Might as well make up yo' min' an' hush," Hammond said sternly but without anger. "You all right. Now set up there like a big little nigger an' be good."

The boy tried to obey. He sat straight, his legs dangling, and was silent, but not for long. After a short interval the whimpering was resumed and the demand for the mother. Hammond was annoyed. He made an effort to be good to his Negroes and never deliberately abused them. They should consider it a privilege to be his property, and they did. In exchange for the distinction, he demanded obedience. He understood well enough how the dam should cling to her offspring, but that was Bixby's business. Why the child, weaned and adequately fed, should cry for its mother was beyond his comprehension. Mere perversity, he reasoned.

He endured the petulant wail as long as he was able. Redfield appeared to be indifferent to it. At length the caravan stopped for the litter-carriers to rest. The other boys were too much engrossed in their tasks to be aware of their separation from their homes, but the youngest continued his lamentation. There seemed no other way.

"Willie, you," said Hammond. "Afore you set down, take that behind one out of that buggy, an' take down an' slap its ass. We got to stop that cryin' fer its mammy. That all. We got to stop it. It drivin' me lunatic."

It was the first authority Willie had ever had meted to him. He, Willie! Before, he had always been the whipped; now he was to be the whipper. He embraced his task with ardor, hardly crediting that it had been allotted to him. He grinned with delight as he jerked the younger boy out of the vehicle. He sat flat on the ground in the middle of the road as he threw the boy across his legs and exposed the small brown buttocks. Uncertain of his technique, he looked inquiringly at his master for his approval, but Hammond seemed indifferent. The whites had dismounted. The other two boys were but mildly interested, happy that it was their brother's rump rather than their own that was to sting.

Willie's palm descended. The victim kicked and screamed and cried. The contact with the soft, smooth buttocks was pleasant to Willie. He adjusted the body across his thighs the better to control the kicking and to give his own arm a better leverage. The boy squirmed futilely and Willie laughed aloud. The pleasure to Willie was physical, but it was more; he got a sense of exaltation in the pain he was inflicting, a dominance in the authority he was exercising. Willie could feel the flinch of the flesh at every impact, but the boy, screaming and crying in his pain, had ceased to struggle. It was more amusing when he kicked and tried to escape.

"I reckon that enough," said Hammond. "It goin' to be good now an' shut up about its mammy. Ain't you?"

"Yas, yas. I be good," answered the boy.

"Pull up his britches, an' let him be," ordered the owner.

The boy, once he was released and on his feet, began to stamp in anger,

holding his smarting buttocks in the palms of his hands, to Redfield's amusement. Finally he aimed a spiteful blow at the still sitting Willie, and set out up the road the way they had come, running.

"Reckon he goin' to make a runner," chuckled Redfield. "Boughten yourse'f a han'ful, ain't you?"

Hammond was enraged. "Ain't had enough," he said grimly. "Willie, fetch it back an' slap it again. Haten to stripe up its laigs with no buggy whip, but I will an' I gotten to."

Willie easily overtook the fugitive and dragged him back by one arm, kicking and screaming. At Hammond's direction, Willie again seated himself in the road, drew the boy to him, took down the pants, and renewed the spanking.

"Keep a-slappin' his ass till he stop his bellerin'. Wear him out," admonished the owner. "Wushed I had a little paddle."

The second chastisement continued until the recipient, drained of his tears, stopped his weeping. The pain of the blows was blunted. Willie's arm was tired, the pleasure of contact of the palm upon soft glutei had subsided, his exultation at vicarious dominance was dulled. Hammond told Willie to put the boy into the surrey, which he did. The child was too exhausted for anger or for effort to escape. He was conquered.

Willie turned to his master, grinning, for commendation of the manner in which he had executed his chore, which the master ignored. "Now, res' you a minute an' we go along," was his only comment.

Willie was not much fatigued. To rest he did not sit, but rather stood on one leg, stork-like, and placed the bottom of one foot against the thigh of the upright leg. He was able to balance himself in this position without support and it appeared to renew his strength.

The spanking, severe as it had been, had caused no injury to the small boy, but it had frightened and chastened him. He resolved to be good, to curb his peevishness. The sting of his fundament subsided, and the soreness of the bruise asserted itself only upon pressure.

The incident had wasted a quarter-hour, precious to Hammond, but it was only an incident. The spanking of small black bottoms or the switching of yellow legs was a routine of slave husbandry, but was usually done by the wenches to their own or to another's young without the command or supervision of the master. Without compunction for what he had done, he was loath to involve himself in such a trifle.

The expedition resumed its slow progress.

Later in the afternoon, the boy's wailing recommenced, and Hammond drew up beside the surrey with, "Wantin' another slappin'? This time I does it myse'f, an' you doesn' hush. Won' leave it to no young buck. I do it."

The warning was effective, for the whimpering stopped and the boy gave no more trouble.

The caravan stopped for meals and sleep at farms or plantations, inns and ordinaries, wherever hunger or nightfall overtook it. Food was plenteous but

not always appetizing to the white men. Some of the mattresses, inexpertly crammed with shucks or moss, were lumpy and the quilts not always clean. Hammond knew what he might expect and was not repelled; Redfield was indifferent.

The horses were comfortably quartered all along the way, and the four young slaves were bedded down together in the stables. Hammond saw to it always that they were provided with fresh, clean, long straw, and they had no complaint, even if they had had the courage to utter it. Willie was fettered and chained at night, but only to the frame of the litter, which he could move if he wished, and not to a stanchion or rack. The precaution was unneeded, if the owner had but known it, for Willie was enjoying the excursion, every stage and step of it, and, after his delegation as the spanker of the younger boy, was so enamored of his new owner that it would have required a pitchfork to drive him away. He fancied himself as his master's surrogate, and his bossing and managing of the younger slaves, when Hammond's back was turned, was tyrannical.

Except for the time it consumed, nothing untoward occurred on the journey. Hammond had counted upon making sixty or seventy miles a day without difficulty, whereas, with the boys carrying the litter, thirty miles was a good day's journey, thirty-five was the maximum, and one day they covered but little more than twenty. Hammond was impatient.

One night the party arrived at the inn at the hamlet of Sanchez, late for supper. The horses and slaves were bedded in the stable while odds and ends of the meal were warmed up for the whites. An ochre-colored girl brought the food and handed it about as best she was able. Young but fully nubile, her buxom contours excited Hammond, and she smiled wantonly at him as she served Redfield at the opposite end of the long table. Hammond had had no female companionship since he had left Falconhurst and he was tempted to ask that this comely wench be sent to his room until she approached him and he sniffed the soil of her body, which he interpreted as musk. It was too late and too cold to demand that she should wash.

Redfield, whose ogling appraisal of the young slave was undisguised, was blessed with poorer olfactories or less squeamishness. The complacent girl, while not indifferent in her choice of men, was not consulted.

The journey, Natchez to Falconhurst, had used up seven days and on the final night there was no pause to sleep. The closer Hammond approached his destination, the more impatient to reach it he became. Two hours before daybreak he abandoned the party to Redfield's care, gave Eclipse his head, and, breaking into a gallop, reached Benson before anybody was stirring and by eight o'clock turned into the lane at Falconhurst.

Lucretia Borgia and Meg seemed to sense the arrival; they were not aware of hearing the hoofbeats. Something brought them pell-mell to the gallery, where they waited for their master to alight. Lucretia Borgia gathered him in her arms and Meg stroked his long coat.

"Whure Papa an' them?" the master demanded. "Ever'thin' all right?"

The latter question Lucretia Borgia refrained from answering. "Ol' Masta, he good; he well, Masta, suh. I reckon he never hear," she said. "Git him, Meg. Tell him Masta done come."

But it was unnecessary. The older man appeared, radiant in his delight. He hugged and kissed his son until the youth was constrained to lead him into the house.

"Whure—whure Blanche an' all of 'em?"

"Blanche ain't a-feelin' real good. She ain't come down," the father explained.

"Drunk?"

"Well, no," the old man hedged. "That is, she ain't drunk much. No more than she needin', in her shape."

Hammond shook his head in doubt as he took a toddy from a tray with which Meg appeared. "An' how Ellen? Whure she? Whyn't she come?" he asked.

"Why, Ellen, I tell you," the old man hesitated. "She gone an' slip that chil' she totin'."

"Ellen right 'shamed. She a-skeared o' seein' you, Masta, suh," Lucretia Borgia interpolated. "I tellin' her you not be mad."

"Slip it? How come?"

Lucretia Borgia left the explanation to the master, and he only shrugged his pretended ignorance.

"Whure she? I got to see her, got to know," said the distraught youth. "I got her somethin'. I brung her a presen'."

"She in the kitchen, a-waitin'," Lucretia Borgia told him, and he set down his toddy without tasting it and went to find her.

Ellen was tremulous in anticipation of seeing her lover, dreadful and avid. As he entered, she faced him, but backed away as if to avoid his blows, which she would have withstood better than the anger she envisioned. "I never meant to. Masta, I never meant to," she pleaded, bursting into weeping.

Hammond pursued her and encircled her in his arms. "It all right; it all right," he assured her. "You well? Ellen, Honey, you gittin' better, we make you another one. Cain't you un'erstan', Honey, it all right. I isn't mad."

Ellen could but bury her face in his coat, comforted but sobbing her satisfaction that she was not blamed.

"Look, Ellen," said Hammond, forcing her to arm's length. "Look. I done fetched you somethin' from the city, somethin' goin' to make you purty. Not that you a-needin' purtifyin'." He drew from his pocket the small packet and unwrapped the earrings from the tissue paper around them. "There. Don' that happify you?"

Ellen took them, moved. "They fer me? They fer me? They purty enough fer a white lady," she beamed her thanks, and fell again to weeping.

"I fetch some jest like 'em, same thing, fer Miz Blanche," said Hammond.

"Miz Blanche, she already got holes; she kin wear hern. I got to have my ears punched."

Hammond had forgotten the need to pierce the ears. "Won't hurt much. We tend to it first thing."

"They purty. They awful purty, Masta, suh." In her enthusiasm, Ellen had forgotten her abortion. "You hadn't ought. They cost."

"Nev' mind, an' they did," Hammond scoffed.

Ellen held the jewels to her ears. "Ain't no other nigger never had aught so purty. Masta, suh! Masta, suh!" she elated.

"They markin' you mine, my own, jest like my letters burned into your hide. You well enough fer tonight? See that you clean. Have Lucretia Borgia wash you all over." Hammond did not press for a cause of the accident. He returned to give his father an accounting of his trip.

"Whure Doc Redfield?" the father asked on the son's return to the sitting room. "He go on home? Whyn't he stop by? Better have that boy heat up your toddy."

"Doc Redfield, he a-comin' with the niggers. I rode ahead."

"Didn' you sell 'em? I tol' you sell 'em. No matter whut they brung. Had ought to a sold 'em."

"These he bringin' are otherns. Jest saplin's—four of 'em," Hammond elucidated.

"Oh," the father was mollified. "Niggers goin' down, I reckon? Ourn didn' hardly fetch nothin', the cholrie an' all?"

"Niggers up, goin' up all the time. Natchez full of folks, runnin' from cholerie. We done right good; twenty-three thousan' or like, besides these four comin'," Hammond gloated. "Course, one run, that mustee," he admitted.

"Git him?"

"No. Still a-runnin'. I reckon he go home to Briarfiel'. I'm goin' there fer him tomorrer."

The father was complacent, but chuckled his disparagement of the boy's carelessness. "Won't do no good," he shook his head. "That boy near white. He strikin' North. I reckoned Redfield more watchful."

"He wanted I should chain 'em," Hammond absolved the doctor. "Here they are, a-comin'."

They went together out upon the gallery to receive Redfield, herding his charges down the lane. The doctor dismounted, exhausted, and shook the elder man's hand.

"Whut kin' of gyascutus is that them bucks a-totin'?" the old man asked, knowing already what a litter was.

"It a carryin' bed fer you to ride in aroun' the plantation. You kin go anywhures now—down by the Tombigbee, up to the buryin' grounds, out to the cotton, anywhures you craves," Hammond expanded with pride.

"Huh!" sniffed the rheumatic. "You expectin' me to ride in that contraption, you wrong. Ain't goin', not a step. I got my own legs yet. Not strong,

but I got 'em. Afore I ridin' aroun', nigger-back, I stay in an' rest me."

"Ever'body in Natchez usin' these carryin' beds," Hammond exaggerated. "Ever'body who cain't git aroun'."

"Cain't he'p. I won'. May be all right in Natchez, an' down in Brazil (hearn they gallivants in 'em down there), an' in all them fine-haired cities, but me out here in the country—no. It ain't no Alabama dingus at all. Mayhap, all right to pleasure in, right sof', an' you ain't got no feather bed, but fer a growed up man to go bouncin' about on niggers' shoul'ers—why, even field niggers would lose their respeck."

Hammond knew that the rejection was final. He had wasted at least four days in bringing the litter, worn out two boys and his own patience, all to no purpose. Pride. Mere pride. He told the bearers to cast it on the gallery floor against the wall of the house.

Instructing Lucretia Borgia to feed the four children well and afterwards to bed them down on long straw, Hammond drew Redfield into the house for breakfast. In the course of it, the doctor, fortified by two preliminary toddies, recounted with amusement Hammond's distress at having sold Phrensy to a white woman for purposes the young man deemed degenerate. Hammond had intended all along to confess it to his father, but not so soon. He was embarrassed by the doctor's tale.

The elder Maxwell laughed uproariously. "Whut you carin', Ham, whut she goin' to do with it?" he demanded rhetorically. "White? Yes! But a Dutchy lady! It ain't the same, like us. Don' you know them Dutchy over there along the river liable to do anythin'? Ain't much better than niggers, theyselves."

"Whut I tellin' him," said Redfield. "On'y thing funny is Ham wishin' he never sol' him. Fifteen hundert dollars."

"You got to remem'er, Son, all folks ain't got no pride. Hain't all got Hammon' blood."

Redfield omitted to discuss the sale of the sterile Pole, since he had himself made it; nor did he mention Hammond's illness and the meeting with Charles. This was a convenient negligence. He had heard Hammond's promise to Charles not to tell Blanche about seeing him and he hoped that the secrecy from the wife would extend to the father. He had compunctions about neglect of his companion, although Hammond had never mentioned it and made no show of blaming him.

After breakfast, the older man suggested, "Bring your bag of gol', Ham, an' pay off Doc Redfield. Might as well, right now. How much we owin' you, Doc?"

"Nothin', nothin' at all. Won't take nothin', not a cent," affirmed Redfield.

"Why?" Maxwell demanded. "Hammond here has had a right fruitful trip. We countin' on payin'. Only right!"

"Beginnin' with, Hammond pay ever'thin', all I spent. Besides that, I sell one of them bucks fer three hun'ert dollars more than he a-wantin' an' he said

I should keep the money. I didn't crave—"

"That case—," Maxwell conceded. "But we willin' to pay. I right obliged you goin' along. If Ham got sick or a-needin' somebody—."

The allusion caused Redfield to wonder whether Hammond had told of his illness before his arrival. Maxwell was capable of such an oblique accusation. Maybe not. Redfield saw fit to take his departure. He could detect no lack of cordiality in the leave-taking.

Hammond even accompanied the guest to his horse, after which he went to the cabin to examine the Mandingos. He found Mede reclining on the bed, Lucy standing above him feeding him bite by bite.

"Whut ails him? Ain't he got stren'th to eat his vittles?" Hammond demanded with irritation.

"Yas, suh, Masta, suh. Mede strong-like," replied Lucy. "On'y he likes I should feed him, layin' down. An' I likes to. He so purty." To the woman, Mede was like a great doll, a helpless baby to humor. She would have liked to take him in her arms and suckle him at her breast.

"I'll purty him," Hammond threatened.

The boy arose to permit his master to inspect him. Hammond detected a softening of the belly muscles, a rounding of rump that he did not like. He accused the slave of neglecting his training. "Cain't git no work out of you up here. I reckon you better be barned agin. Room a plenty down there now. This takin' up—"

"No, no, Masta, suh. He workin' all the time. All the time, Mede here runnin', jumpin', a-liftin'. All the time. All the time." There was anxiety in Lucy's voice.

Mede was indifferent to the threat. He accepted whatever happened.

"Well, keep him workin' hisself. I be home to stay in three, four, five days, an' then I takin' him in han'. I learn him whut workin' is."

After riding all night, Hammond was fatigued, and he returned to the house. Blanche, big-bellied and blowzy, had come downstairs.

She rocked her chair gently and greeted her husband with, "Whut you fetch me? You gone a long while, an' me here a-waitin' fer it!"

He drew the trinkets from his pocket and gave them to her. They pleased her beyond his expectations. She could only gasp and gasp again in her excitement. The earrings rested in the lap of her Mother Hubbard, but she raised them, one at a time, and looked at them singly, despite that they were alike.

"They di'mon's?" she inquired.

"Not di'monds," Hammond opined. "Di'monds white. These somethin' else."

"They costs, I reckon."

Hammond admitted that they had some value. "Put 'em on," he suggested.

Blanche struggled to insert the clasps into the small holes in her ears, which had shrunk from disuse. She ignored the pain.

"Now I cain't see 'em no more. Are they purty?"

"Your hair brushed, an' they goin' to be. Cain't see 'em now, your hair so snarly-like an' hangin'." There was no note of censure in the boy's statement.

"Now, folks goin' to know who your wife, who you buyin' jewelry." Blanche turned her florid, bloated face from side to side the better to display the gift. Garnets accentuated the girl's blondness and the bloat of her coarse-pored skin.

The indiscretion of bringing identical presents to his wife and his concubine smote Hammond for the first time. Why had he not foreseen Blanche's resentment, which was sure to follow? There was no occasion for a gift to Ellen, who had expected none—except that he loved her. The gift had been made and could not be withdrawn. He kept silent about it.

"These ain't nothin'. They don' mark you my wife. But I got somethin' that do. I got me that di'mond ring at las'." He got out the soiled ring Charles had thrown at him and placed it on her finger. "Now, that there is a di'mond," he said.

Blanche examined it proudly and kissed it on her finger. "How it sparkle!" she wondered, holding her soiled hand in the air and twisting her gross wrist. "Now I kin have my chil'. I married right. Plumb married."

"We married all right, even before. Your papa written it right in his Bible," Hammond asserted without satisfaction. "It hold. That chil' of yourn legal."

"I knowin', but now I got me the di'mon' ring."

Hammond was cheered by the simple girl's pleasure with her bauble.

"She ain't got none," Blanche gloated.

"Who ain't?"

"That Ellen."

"Course not. She jest a nigger," Hammond scoffed.

"She slip her chil' while you away," Blanche introduced the subject tentatively and cautiously. She wanted to make sure that he did not know the cause.

"That whut Papa say. Don' know whut make her. I wantin' you should be careful."

"I is. I ain't slippin' nothin'. I's glad, glad she slip it. I didn't do it, but I's glad."

"How come? Whut fer you glad? That sucker worth a hunderd, two hunderd dollars the day she drop it," Hammond attributed his interest in the accident to the monetary value of the child.

"Oh, she thinkin' she so purty an' all, rollin' her eyes. Jes' another nigger!"

"Ellen don' mean no harm. She right nice, an' smooth," Hammond defended his property.

"You a-thinkin' that chil' yourn?"

"Whut chil'?"

"That Ellen's," Blanche specified spitefully.

Hammond shrugged an assumed ignorance. He had never denied to his wife his relationship with Ellen or any other wench.

"One of the bucks, likely; liable all of 'em. She pleasurin' with 'em all, 'specially that Mede," the wife asserted without denial from her spouse. "Leastwise, it come black," she went on, "or real dark, ever'body sayin'."

"Who sayin'? Who?"

"Folks, niggers, ever'body who seen it. Real dark."

Hammond did not dispute the assertion. If the belief gave his wife any satisfaction, she was welcome. He was tired, tired of the night's ride, and tired of the conversation. The thin ice over which Blanche had skated had not broken through.

"I reckon I better lay me down awhile," said Hammond. "I got to go agin, come mornin'."

When he awoke, Blanche was with his father, and he found no opportunity to tell of his meeting with Charles; nor could he tell of his illness without dragging Charles into the story.

CHAPTER 38

BEFORE the break of the following day, Hammond set out on his ride to Briarfield. Meg arose to dress him and Lucretia Borgia to prepare his breakfast. He was irked by the necessity to make the journey, irresolute in his determination to flog the truant slave when—and if—he should find him. Still vexed with Ace that this errand should be required, the violence of his anger had subsided and he was bent only upon retrieving and securing his property. If there were any other way than whipping to forestall a slave's escape, Hammond would have embraced it.

He rode rapidly. His horse had not been taxed on the trip from Natchez and had rested in his spacious stall the whole of the previous day. The morning was crisp with just a hint of frost, and activity warmed both horse and rider.

Riding hard, he reached Fairfax in time for supper and Briarfield the following morning in time for dinner. Passing the Church farm, he saw Moonlight, heavy in foal, and Too Sweet nibbling in the pasture, and the young stallion, making now into maturity, whinnied a challenge to Eclipse. Hammond galloped onward, fearful of encountering Mad Church, which he knew would result in pressure upon him to stop and, perhaps, Mad would be in tears because he wouldn't.

Eph Maddox at the hotel had seen nothing of Ace. After his brother's death, the widow's house had burned and she had left the country, had gone back to Georgia whence Sime had got her, Eph supposed. There was little love lost between Eph Maddox and Sime's widow. In any event, a trip to the Maddox farm would be futile.

"It's whut comes of you not a-hidin' him when you had him. Had ought to of laid it onto him the day you kotched him before, the very day, and of burned an "R" on his cheek soon as you could git him home. Comes to waitin', puttin' it off, niggers fergits, 'specially young ones. You got to bloody up a runner."

Hammond agreed with Maddox in principle.

"Course, I un'erstan'. You on your honeymoon an' all, not wantin' to bother," Eph tempered his blame.

Hammond was resigned; he had only half expected to find the boy, in any event, and he did not know where else to seek for him. He had no will to go to Crowfoot, but felt an obligation, since he was so near, to visit his wife's parents.

"The ol' Major goin' loony, folks says," the innkeeper told Hammond. "Don't know, my own self. Ain't seed him fer a long time back."

"I ain't heared nothin', an' Miz Maxwell ain't," Hammond expressed his doubt.

"It's that boy that done it, that Charlie runnin' away. Jest drove his pappy crazy."

Hammond knew he must go and see.

When he rode into Crowfoot, he noticed that the plantation was in a better state than when he had last seen it. Fences had been repaired, gates were upright, weeds had been mowed, cabins whitewashed. The house was tightly shut up, although smoke came from the chimney and he knew somebody was at home. At length a Negro woman came from somewhere to take his horse and it was necessary for him to knock upon the door for admission.

The Negro man, who after awhile answered the knock, said, "Masta Dick out, suh, Masta. I ain't know wha' at are he. Come right in an' set down, suh. You Miz Blanche's man. I knows you."

"But whure Major Woodford? Whure your masta?" Hammond inquired.

"Set down, Masta, suh," suggested the servant, leading the way to the parlor. "I tell Mist'ess you come."

Hammond heard him in the sitting room, trying to make Beatrix understand his presence, and heard her hollow "Oh!"

When she entered to greet him, she appeared browner than ever, more sallow and bloodless, her teeth more discolored, in the same brown dress, which appeared to have darkened. And she was older, many years older. She walked with her horn to her ear.

"Oh, Cousin Hammond!" she greeted him, falling into his arms. "I been a-thinkin', thinkin' and a-prayin', wishin' you'd come. How Blanche? How she? How my little girl?"

Hammond screamed his reassurance into the horn, but was by no means sure the woman understood. "Whure the Major, Major Woodford?" he asked. "I reckon he out?"

"How?" she wrinkled her face and extended the horn.

Hammond repeated his question.

"Papa?" she asked. "He is porely. He jest set an' don' say nothin'. Come an' see him."

Hammond followed Beatrix into the sitting room, where the Major sprawled in a large rocking chair, slowly and aimlessly moving to and fro, to and fro. He looked at Hammond without appearing to see him and without recognition.

Beatrix took him by the shoulder and shook him. "It's Hammon', Cousin Hammon' Maxwell, Papa. Don' you know him?"

Hammond would hardly have recognized his father-in-law, he was so changed. He was fat, softly fat, and his face was bloated until no wrinkles showed. It was utterly without expression. All the animation had gone out of it. He paid no attention to Hammond, seemed not to see him. Hammond picked up the Major's hand from his lap, shook it, and replaced it. It returned no pressure.

"Papa, he's porely," Beatrix explained again.

"Who runnin' Crowfoot?" Hammond asked and repeated. "It lookin' real nice, better, that is."

When Beatrix finally understood the question, she answered, "Why, Dick, he runnin' it, best he kin. Oh, he ain't give up preacherin'. I couldn't stan' that. He still a-servin' God, but he had to take a-holt. Wasn' nobody else, an' Charles gone, dead I reckon. We ain't heard nothin'. I keep a-prayin' an' a-prayin', askin' God to fin' him, us a-needin' him like we do."

Hammond made an effort to reply, but was unable to make himself understood. Beatrix rambled on, and the guest merely nodded and shook his head, grimacing to acknowledge what she said. Major Woodford spoke not a word and appeared to hear none.

Beatrix looked out the window and said, "I wonder whyn't Dick come. It time fer him. He kin talk; I cain't hardly 'cause my hearin' gittin' bad. You notice?" Hammond nodded and the woman fell silent.

It was half an hour before Dick's footsteps were heard on the gallery, during which Beatrix and Hammond sat looking at each other and the speechless Major at neither of them.

"Consarn, consarn!" Dick greeted his brother-in-law. "Consarn! I knowed you was come. Saw your hoss in the stable. Right glad to see you, right glad! Ain't nobody to talk, Papa losin' his min' an' Mamma gone deef, nobody, savin' the niggers."

"Wasn't knowin' about your Papa. Whut ail him?" Hammond asked.

Dick shook his head. "Ain't no knowin'. Jest sets and don' talk none. Min' clean gone. Ain't led the right life, I reckon; drinkin' and carryin' on. Ain't right with Jesus."

"Blanche will be right sorry to hear," said Hammond.

"That right, Blanche?" Dick asked, as if he had just thought of his sister. "Blanche? How she come on?"

"She well," her husband assured. "That is, as well as kin be, allowin' the shape she in."

"Whut shape she in?"

"Why, she knocked. She in a family way. She goin' to have a chil'." Hammond did not know how to put the fact with more delicacy.

"Consarn! She is? You sure? When it comin'?"

"Don' exactly know. Couple of months. She bulgin' big," Hammond said proudly.

"Then the marriage took that I said over you. You didn' lose no time gittin' her knocked! Consarn!" Dick turned from Hammond to his mother and asked, "Hear that, Mamma, whut Ham a-sayin'?"

Beatrix adjusted her horn and Dick re-asked his question. She shook her head and leaned forward to hear.

"Hammond say Blanche, she goin' to have a baby." Dick repeated the statement three times.

When she finally understood, Beatrix was shocked, alarmed. "Oh, oh,

you horrible man, doin' that, doin' that to my little girl. No! No! She too young! You mustn't; she mustn't," the mother cried, dropping her horn and wringing her hands.

Dick retrieved the trumpet. "Whut you reckon? They married, isn't they? Whut fer you reckon they git married?" he screamed at the woman, who failed—or refused—to hear him.

Major Woodford took no cognizance of what was said, but stared vacantly into a far corner of the room and continued to rock.

Hammond was too embarrassed to reply to his mother-in-law. He wished he had not come.

"I'll pray, I pray. Jest somethin' else to pray about," the woman wept. "First, Charles, then Papa, now pore little Blanche. An' it seem like Jesus jest don' pay no attention. He knowin' bes'. Mayhap, He goin' to hear me now."

"Too late," laughed Dick, clapping Hammond warmly on the shoulder. "Consarn, whut else they fer—women? Course they goin' to have babies. Won't hurt her none. Blanche, she right buxom."

Beatrix wiped the tears from her eyes, and asked, "When it due to come? How long?"

"Month or two, I reckon. Blanche, she right big," Hammond faltered.

"An' I cain't go, cain't be with my pore little girl an' do fer her." Beatrix shook her head and burst into fresh tears. "Papa done gone crazy-like, an' I cain't leave him alone—jest alone with Dick. He'd do somethin' to Dick. Oh, oh, oh! Seem like you the cause of all my trouble. I wisht I never seen you, wisht Cousin Sophy hadn't never had you!" She arose and fled from the room.

"Consarn! Which is the looniest, her or Papa, I ain't a-knowin!" said Dick, shaking his head. "Charlie an' Blanche is lucky or smart or somethin', gittin' away an' shet of 'em—leavin' me to fret an' manage."

"Plantation lookin' better—right smart better," Hammond congratulated his cousin.

"Yas, I went an' sol' off a couple of ol' niggers. Had to; don' care an' they was mortgage, I jest made 'em over same as they was mine. I had to git me some money to plant with. An' I put the otherns workin'. Papa never made 'em do nothin'. Got three or four of the wenches bringin' suckers, an' sows all in farrow. Go to plant me a cotton crop an' a corn crop, too. Do jest like it was mine, my own. I reckon, with Charlie dead, I'll be heirin' it anyhow, purty soon. The ol' folks cain't live long."

Major Woodford stopped his rocking. "They tryin' to kill me, Dick an' Beatrix," he said in a loud whisper. "Tryin' to pizen me, all the time, tryin' to pizen me. Cain't you do somethin' about it, Hammon'?" These were the first words he had spoken to Hammond, the first intimation that he had recognized his presence.

"I reckon they ain't, suh. They don' want you should die," Hammond sought to placate the old man.

"He always a-thinkin' that. Cain't pay no 'tention to his loony talkin'," Dick interposed.

"They gits shet of me, an' Dick goin' to kill his mamma, an' he thinkin' he have Crowfoot all hisself," persisted the father. "He fergittin' Blanche an you—an' Charlie, if he alive yet."

"Blanche ain't a-needin her part. Don't fret none about Blanche an' me," Hammond soothed.

"You right sure you never killed Charles? He went runnin' off with you an' he never come back. I reckon you done kill him. Good riddance. Wasn't no good, no way. I ain't a-blamin' you, ain't a-blamin' you at all," the Major condoned.

"Charles yet a-livin'. That is, I reckon," Hammond was tempted to tell of his seeing Charles at Natchez. He wondered whether in the circumstances it would violate his promise, but he decided to keep silent.

"I ain't a-blamin' you fer killin' him," persisted the insane man. "Whut you do it with, shootin' or pizen? Whure you bury him?"

The accusation, even while he recognized its irresponsibility, made Hammond uneasy.

"You got him talkin', leastwise," said Dick. "He ain't talked none, ain't opened his mouth, fer a month. Papa," he turned to his father, "Hammon' never kilt Charlie. You makin' things up, jest like you makin' out Mamma an' me tryin' to pizen you."

Major Woodford projected his tongue at his son, withdrew it and set his lips in a hard line. He resumed his rocking and said no more.

"Mustn't never min' him. He loony—kind of," Dick said. He accepted his father's infirmity factually, a thing to be faced and acknowledged, and had no reticence in discussing it in his presence.

"Supper done ready, Masta Dick, suh," old Washington, whom Hammond had last seen as a coachman, appeared to announce. He helped Major Woodford to his feet and shepherded him toward the dining room. The younger men followed.

Beatrix was already seated at the table and Wash drew the chair opposite her for her husband. Dick and Hammond sat between them, facing each other. Dick said a prolonged and passionate grace in a loud voice directed into Beatrix's trumpet, but she was unable to hear the words.

Woodford ignored the prayer and as soon as he was seated began reaching for the food, to all of which he helped himself in huge portions.

"Seem you could wait fer the blessin'," Beatrix protested, " 'specially when they's company." To Hammond she added, "Got to overlook Papa. Don' know whut he doin'. Cain't git him to wait an' be nice."

The old man ignored her, pretended not to hear. Before the prayer was finished, he had heaped his plate with victuals, and, grasping it with both hands, he lifted it toward Wash and said, "Taste."

The Negro took the plate, and, using his fingers instead of a fork, lifted

some of each of its contents to his mouth. Of the chicken, he had no alternative but to bite it from its bone.

"Papa reckons we tryin' to pizen him an' he tryin' the vittles on the nigger," Beatrix explained the strange rite. "It don' kill the nigger, he guesses it all right fer him."

Woodford's eyes were focused upon the features of his slave in expectation of seeing him fall down in a death-agony. When Wash survived the ordeal and handed the plate back to him, he accepted it with a show of disappointment that the Negro had not died. That a mere taste of each viand had not killed Wash instantly, Woodford took as evidence that the food was safe and he began a furious stirring and mixing together of the various articles on his plate, after which he bolted the conglomeration like a cormorant, wiping the plate clean with bread. He then calmly pushed back his chair, rose, and left the room. The others had hardly begun to eat.

"Papa ain't hisself," Beatrix sighed, "actin' that a-way. He plague us right smart, Dick and me."

"He ain't bad, on'y he don' do nothin' an' don' say nothin'. He'll git over it, I reckon, when he takes a notion," commented Dick.

"How?" demanded his mother, leaning toward him with her trumpet. "Whut you say?"

The young man shook his head to indicate to her that his speech had been unimportant. Excluded from the conversation, she abandoned the effort to follow it and set to eating her meal. She could see the movement of the lips of the young men, knew when one was speaking and the other replying, and was curious about the drift of their conversation. Her loss was not great, however, since all that Dick told Hammond she already knew, and since Hammond's tale of his trip to Natchez was so filled with reservations about his seeing Charles and about the money derived from the sale of the slaves, it was deprived of all reality. He did declare his errand to Briarfield and urged the necessity to pursue Ace further as an excuse to escape from the stifling hospitality of Crowfoot, with its deaf, religion-bound woman and its crazy man. Dick, whom circumstances had forced into responsibility and manhood, he could have endured.

Supper over, Hammond asked for his horse. Beatrix, who had heard nothing about the runaway slave, was shocked and injured by his show of haste.

"You doesn't like us at Crowfoot, seem like," she complained. "Won't never settle down an' stay awhile."

"Cousin Hammon' got to kotch him a runnin' nigger," Dick bellowed into her horn. "Consarn, cain't you un'erstan'?"

Beatrix looked blankly from one face to the other in her failure of comprehension. "Seem like he could stay one night here as good as at Briarfield. There ain't no moon an' he cain't go on no ways."

"He after a nigger," Dick bellowed again; and then in a normal voice

added, "She gittin' worse, seem like. She cain't hear, 'specially when she ain't a-wantin' to."

"You tell Blanche that I cain't come, but I kin pray, I kin pray," said Beatrix, beginning to weep. "When she git shet of this one, don' make her have no more, Cousin Hammon'. Havin' a chil' ain't nothin' to a man, but it a turrible trial fer a lady. I've had four of 'em, countin' the one that died. Papa jest that heartless. Don't you be heartless. Tell her I goin' to pray."

Hammond made no promise. When he bade farewell to Major Woodford, the host permitted him to shake his hand, but said not a word and did not cease his rocking in his chair. The perfunctory kiss Hammond planted on the cheek of his mother-in-law was an obligation.

"Consarn, but I'd like to ride with you, a-lookin' fer that buck, but I cain't. Bound down. That whut I am, bound down," Dick bewailed his fate.

Hammond had no intention of pursuing Ace further, since he had no clue as to where to look. Baffled, he was bound merely for home. When he reached Briarfield, the little town was dark. At the stable, he whooped and called for the Negro to take his horse and had despaired and shut Eclipse in a stall he found empty when the boy finally crawled down the ladder from the hayloft where he slept. Languidly, half asleep, the slave groped around, promising to feed and water the animal. Maddox, hearing Hammond calling the slave, crawled from his bed and, clad only in undershirt and long, baggy drawers, stood at the door of the tavern with a lighted candle to show the guest to his room.

"Found the Major stark, I reckon?" he commented. "I could a-told you, only I didn't. Nobody don' like it, to hear one of his family (even his wife's family) that a-way. The ol' Major never was quite right in his head, I reckon, the way he carry on, makin' like he rich."

"I never noticed nothin' before this time. Course, he peculiar," Hammond admitted.

"Hope you never thought he was rich, that time you wedded his gal," Maddox pried.

"I never cared," boasted Hammond. "We got enough, my papa an' me."

"I reckoned," Maddox nodded in the candlelight. "I reckon you all right to sleep."

Left alone, Hammond struggled with his boot, stripped off his clothes, and got into bed. Tomorrow he should be able to reach Fairfax easily, and the following day arrive home. The journey was as uneventful as it had been futile.

CHAPTER 39

HAMMOND had had some misgivings lest the plantation should have suffered from lack of his management during his long absence at Natchez, which his single day at home had not resolved, and was mildly disappointed to find how little he had been needed. Lucretia Borgia, in addition to her duties as cook, had taken to herself the function of supervision, from which nothing and nobody escaped. She had seen to it that the slaves were fed and cared for, she saw to it also that they were kept busy enough not to deteriorate or grow slack and lazy. When tasks were not apparent, she made them—mending of clothes, cleaning of cabins and barns, chopping of unneeded wood, spading of garden patches. She even assigned chores to the children, the pulling of weeds, the sweeping of areaways between the cabins, the gathering of fagots. Hammond was pleased with the order that he found.

The gold he had brought from Natchez was still in the house, and he had his boys unbury the kettle from under the tree, added to the hoard the Natchez money, and reburied the treasure. For lack of anything to be done, he lightened the slaves' work and allowed them more leisure and ease. All except Mede, whom he believed to have shirked his training and whom he put to arduous toil, chopping down trees and splitting the wood for fences, and after a day at that, forced him to run behind Eclipse for half an hour, to carry weights, to jump for him, both high and broad, to bend and twist and turn, anything to bring the slave's muscles into play, to flex and harden them. Mede's strength was prodigious, but he was lazy and saw no reason to exert it, and his master never surfeited at watching his activity. Lucy, anointing and massaging his exhausted body with serpent oil at night, harped on his lethargy and exhorted him to greater effort to satisfy his master. The more she grumbled, the harder she rubbed. Mede listened but little to the sermon she preached, but he relished the friction and pommeling she gave him, and when she was finished and drew the quilt over his nakedness, he sprawled in relaxation and went to sleep.

Not the bulging of the women's bellies deterred him from fornication, but rather his spent strength. He accepted it as his prerogative that he should luxuriate upon the bed alone, spreading his legs and threshing his arms, while the women slept together and with Bel upon the puncheoned floor, nor did they dispute it. When, from time to time, he permitted Big Pearl to join him, for which the girl was always avid, he ousted her after his appetite was satisfied and thrust himself out to cover the whole mattress and to sleep alone.

Mede not only hardened but grew, increased in stature and in girth. His legs were like hickories, his arms like pythons, his belly like an anvil. He ate hugely and slept at every respite. His owner had no anticipation of finding an opponent with whom to fight him, but kept him in training as a show

piece and ready if a worthy adversary should appear. Disregarding Wilson's warning that Mandingo hybrids tended to treachery, Hammond bred Mede to several of his wenches and already three or four, in addition to Lucy and Big Pearl, were pregnant to him. Lucy was complacent about such use of the boy, but Big Pearl was fiery though impotent in her jealousy, placing the blame on Mede rather than upon her master where it belonged. The youth was always acquiescent in such an assignment but never eager, although the women considered themselves favored and boasted to their neighbors of the alliance. Mede knew himself to be his master's property, to be used as the master saw fit to use him; if as a stallion, Mede was grateful not only for the mate allotted to him but for the short surcease from training that he knew would follow. Hammond begrudged him those intervals as much as the loss of his strength, which he sought to restore by forcing upon the exhausted youth an additional pitcher of milk and eggs.

Hammond had no such concern for his own virility, for every night he shared his bed with Ellen, who treasured his caresses as if every one should be the last. She had no awareness of his obligation to his wife, and Hammond believed that by accepting a surrogate he was relieving Blanche of her distasteful duty to him. To Ellen, the master was the master, whom she would have obeyed even if she had not loved him so entirely. She could not credit her good fortune in being chosen for his mistress and dreaded the day, which she anticipated, of being displaced and relegated to another.

Lucretia Borgia, as pleased as Ellen with the earrings, had pierced the girl's lobes with a darning needle to accommodate the jewels, and when Hammond returned from Briarfield he found Ellen with short straws through her ears to prevent the punctured lobes from closing as they healed. Three days later, unable to wait longer, Ellen withdrew the straws and inserted the earrings, which somehow enhanced her dark beauty. Perhaps it was her beaming happiness with the red baubles and with Hammond's approval of them that heightened her loveliness, but she thought it was the jewels alone that were alluring. The gift was an assurance of her tenure in her owner's affections, and she brushed her hair back and swung her head for all to see.

The other slaves admired Ellen's jewels without envy of them; after all, she was the master's own wench and was entitled to an ornament to mark her status. All but Meg. He pretended for days not to see the earrings, but they rankled.

"Masta, suh, please, suh," he addressed Hammond one night while undressing him, unable to keep longer silence, "come that time, Christmas time, is you goin' to give me some things fer my ears, like Miz Ellen got?" It was a hint, a reminder.

Hammond was patient with the boy. "You a buck. Buck niggers don' wear no earrings. They jest fer wenches. Besides, you'd have to have holes punched in your ears, an' that hurt," he explained and evaded.

"Wouldn't hurt no more than it hurt Miz Ellen," the boy pouted. "I craves

'em. I craves to be like her an' sleep right in your bed an' pleasure jest like she do. You leave me to, Masta, suh—sometime?"

Hammond's patience snapped. Underrating Meg's ignorance, he took umbrage at the proposal and slapped the bronze cheeks three times, smartly. The boy burst into tears, more at the rebuff than at the pain, and sank to his knees at his master's feet.

"I ain't wantin' no stinkin' buck nigger in bed. Whut you reckon?" Hammond said, with indignation. "You goin' to be my nigger, be my nigger. Else I goin' to sleep you in the barn with the otherns, fatten you up an' sell you off. You jest a cotton nigger. You ain't no wench. Feel betwixt your legs. Next time I hears anything like you cravin' to be a wench, I goin' to hang you up. Hear?"

Compassionate Ellen stooped and kissed Meg. "He wants to an' has his ears fixed, I lets him wear my pretties sometimes, when you not to home to see 'em," she proposed.

"They yourn," Hammond said, "an' no buck saplin' ain't goin' to wear 'em. That all. Ain't no wench an' don' need 'em."

Meg knew that Ellen would protect him from the promised whipping, but he knew also that he should have neither the earrings nor the place he coveted in his master's bed and he was disappointed, out of favor, when he lay down outside Hammond's door.

Blanche, one day in the kitchen, whither she had gone to mix a toddy for herself, unknown to Maxwell, glimpsed Ellen's earrings and knew they were duplicates of her own. Her temptation was to tear them from the girl's ears, but Hammond was at home and she knew the wrath it would kindle. She forbore. Instead, she went upstairs and unscrewed her own trinkets from her ears, but could not bear to throw the pretty, gleaming things out the window as she had intended. She put them in a corner of a drawer of her commode. She was, indeed, as much prettier without them as Ellen was with them. Their absence, had she but known it, was no loss to her. It broke her heart to take them out of her ears, but it was already broken that Ellen should have others like them.

The light was failing when Hammond came in from work, but instantly he entered the sitting room he perceived that the earrings had disappeared from his wife's ears. "Drops git to painin' you?" he asked, fingering the lobe of his own ear.

"No!" Blanche bit the word.

"Why ain't you wearin' 'em then?" he inquired naïvely.

"That slut, that dirty nigger slut of yourn. You brung her earrings jest like mine. Think I'd wear 'em? No!" Blanche began to weep in her anger.

Hammond now saw how grave was the offense of making like presents to his wife and to his concubine.

"Now, now," he said. "It ain't nothin'."

"Her time gittin' near," consoled his father. "She right squeamish. All

white ladies is, about this time." He abhorred dissension and sought to quell it.

"Might as well burn your letters right on her face—an' mine. Bran' 'em right in, so all the world goin' to know who we-uns belongs to. Nobody cain't touch a woman with no red earrings. She Hammon' Maxwell's woman, white or black," Blanche screamed. "I ain't your whore to be marked off." She rose, threshing her arms, and made toward the hall.

Hammond caught her by the shoulder and placed her again in her chair. "That di'mon' ring, I goin' to take that too, an' you doesn't behave. Then whut you goin' to do? That boy you totin' in your belly goin' to be a bastard an' I does. Want he should be a bastard an' ever'body sayin'?"

"No! No! No!" Blanche cried.

"You know our weddin' don' hold. Dick, he ain't no reverend, ain't no purentee reverend, jest a reverend fer niggers. Ain't got no right to marry whites. It all I got to do," Hammond threatened, "jest to say we ain't married an' sen' you home to your crazy papa and have your bastard."

The girl knew no better than to believe what Hammond himself half credited. She had no answer, but shrieked hysterically.

"Now, Son, it all right," Maxwell tried to calm the storm. "You wedded; you know you wedded fast to Blanche here. Hadn't ought to skear her this time. She slip that chil', liable to, right here an' you go to skear her."

"I don' care. Ellen mine an' I goin' to have her, whutever you says," Hammond declared petulantly.

"Have her! Have the slut! I ain't carin' an' you has her, on'y don' try to mark us off with your ol' red earrings. You cain't marry her. She ain't white. She jest your bed slut. I your wife, I your wife," Blanche shrilled, rising again and making toward the door.

Hammond let her go and could hear her climbing the stairs.

The father was more distressed by the scene than the son or his wife. It always distressed him to know Hammond in the wrong and he could not blink now that he was behaving brutally. "Go foller her an' love her up, Son," he urged. "Tell her it ain't so. Tell her you married fast. Tell her you sorry."

"She kin go to hell, all I care," sulked Hammond. "Ellen, she mine, she mine, an' I keepin' her. Keepin' her, do you hear, keepin' her?"

"Course. Course you keepin' Ellen. I ain't findin' no fault with Ellen," Maxwell pacified his child, assuming to laugh. "Only Blanche, she white. She your wife. Hadn' ought to rile her, 'specially now—how she is. Nobody ain't stoppin' you keepin' your wench."

"I reckon I hadn't ought to brung her them earrings like Blanche's, only they so purty on her ears, an' I never thought," he conceded.

Blanche did not come down for supper, and neither of the Maxwells had any appetite for food. The elder drank toddies, hot and strong, when the meal was over. The younger man abstained and sat in silent contemplation in the flickering candlelight until it was time for bed.

By next morning the tempest had subsided. Blanche appeared for her breakfast as if nothing had occurred and was affable as usual. Hammond offered no objection to her after-breakfast toddy, and after he had gone she drank another and another, which Maxwell made no move to curb. She had rather pointedly, however, failed to resume her earrings, which Hammond noted without comment. He also noted and admired Ellen's, gleaming in her ears.

CHAPTER 40

CHRISTMAS was not ignored on Falconhurst. The three days of idleness granted to the slaves—except the house slaves—were not novelties, save that they were reckoned as a right and not as a mere absence of tasks. The livestock were fed and cared for, but otherwise nobody worked—not even in the patches allotted for gardens. At that time of year, Hammond was put to it to find enough labor for the hands to relieve their ennui and promote their industry, but even from that there was respite at Christmas. Even Mede was permitted to break his training, which caused his master some misgivings lest he grow flaccid. The house Negroes were relieved of none of their duties, which in any event were not onerous—except Lucretia Borgia's and she would have been desolated to be deprived of her bossy overseeing of everything and everybody, including her masters. Held to their usual tasks, discipline within the house was relaxed and license was given for acts and speech that would not have been tolerated at other times. Maxwell shared toddies with Meg until the boy stumbled with tipsiness.

Presents were few. Clothes and blankets, such as would otherwise have been needed anyway, were issued to the slaves, many of them merely mended and washed, handed down to smaller adolescents from youths who had outgrown them. Each child was given a stick of candy. Some ate it at once and afterwards regretted that it was gone. Others, more prudent, sucked on it charily, withdrew it from their mouths and treasured the remnants, and required days for its final consumption. A few put it away without tasting to cherish for its beauty. Blanche gave Tense some crumpled ribbons to prink her hair, and Tense was delighted.

All the boys too old for candy were assembled before the house and each was allotted a hot toddy. Maxwell went out on the gallery to drink with them. A few relished and savored the potion, and the others pretended to, for the conceit it gave them to drink with the master.

"Um, um, ain't it jest good?" one yellow boy, seeking to deny his distaste for the concoction, asked a somewhat darker one who stood beside him.

"That ain't nothin'," Alph, with no glass in his hand, boasted. "I has it anytime I wants, right out of Masta's glass, ever' day I has it, right outn his glass."

The half-truth begot the wonderment, if not the envy, it sought. "Does you now?" the yellow boy raised his eyes.

"For my rheumatiz, jes' like ol' Masta's. He dreen it into me," the urchin bragged.

The greeting of "Chris'mas gif', Chris'mas gif' " was exchanged whenever two Negroes met, all over the plantation throughout the three days. It was all they had to exchange, and none knew quite what it meant. It implied

good-will, which is the meaning of Christmas. Despite its meagerness, the season was jocund and lighthearted. All were happy.

"The way it had always ought to be," Maxwell declared. "Them young saplin's got more growin' into 'em in three days than they gits in three weeks of work time. You kin jes' see 'em laugh an' grow."

"They grows, I reckon it," conceded Hammond, "Only that sugar candy rot their teeth an' not a-workin' is makin' 'em triflin'."

"Whut they got to work fer? Whut it bring 'em? Whut it bring you or anybody? Let 'em grow." The old man was no disciple of industry. Let labor who would; the increment upon which he depended was unearned. The hours Hammond devoted to the training of Mede his father did not begrudge, for that was sport, but he reprehended the other work, the daily round of the plantation management to which he son devoted so much time which, in the father's opinion, would be so much better devoted to sitting on his haunches and swizzling toddies. His concept of Negro husbandry was to feed the stock and to encourage it to reproduce and to grow. He loved his slaves collectively, as if they had been puppies, and valued their homage, and faith, and dependence. His anxiety was constant lest his vassals be underfed or overworked.

Late in January Big Pearl had her baby. She lay on the floor alongside her mother and, waking in the night, nudged the older woman and complained, "Mammy Lucy, I got a mizery."

Lucy roused herself and asked, "Whure at you hurt?"

"My belly hurt. It hurt awful," answered the girl, massaging herself.

"It comin'; your sucker comin'. Jest let it hurt. Cain't do nothin' till Masta wake up. He give you somethin'," the mother explained, rising and stoking the fire. "Is you cold?"

"No, I's burnin'. I cain't stan' it no longer. It hurtin', hurtin' agin. The hurtin' come an' then it stop an' come on agin," the girl groaned.

"It fightin' to git out. It tired of your guts," said Lucy. "I 'member me when you come." She sank to her knees, lifted Big Pearl's dress, and with her able hands tried to force the child downward. "You mus' try, when I squeezes. Grunt like," she admonished.

Lucy knew not how many hours the girl might have to suffer. She was doing all she knew how, but Big Pearl seemed not to cooperate with her. Big Pearl convulsed and the round head of the baby appeared between her legs.

"It comin', it comin'. Now I git me a-hold of it. Grunt some more. Bear down on it," said Lucy, relieved that the worst was over. She grasped the head and struggled while the shoulders gradually slipped along, followed by the torso and legs.

Big Pearl relaxed, tired but grateful for her freedom from pain, while Lucy quickly broke the membrane and freed the baby to the air.

"It a little buck," she announced proudly. "Masta, he goin' to be glad. He wantin' a buck. They worth more than wenches." She bent and severed the cord with her teeth, and, holding the gasping child aloft by its feet, spanked

it soundly until it inhaled deeply and wailed aloud.

Mede, who slept on the bed with his wonted soundness, was aroused by the shrill cry. He opened his eyes and asked, "Whut that? Whut that? Whut that? Whut that noise? Whut the matter?"

"It come," said Lucy, carrying the baby to the bed, "an', look, it a buck, a big buck an' it goin' to live." The child squirmed in her arms and continued to howl its protest.

Indifferently Mede asked, adjusting himself to the bed, "A sucker? Come out of Big Pearl?"

"Big Pearl an' you. You put it there. You its pappy," Lucy urged in her enthusiasm.

"Make it stop that mewl. How you reckon I goin' to sleep, it hollerin' so?" Mede turned on his side.

When Lucretia Borgia arose, she found Belshazzar at the door, sent by Lucy with the news.

"Whut you wants me to do?" Lucretia Borgia assumed indifference. "Is Big Pearl bad sick, or somethin'? Sucker livin'?"

"Yas, 'um. It livin'. Big Pearl done had it; she ain't sick no more," Shaz explained. "Mammy Lucy say tell you to tell Masta, ma'am."

"Whut reckon I goin' to pester Masta ev' time a wench farrow young?" Lucretia Borgia sniffed. "Go on along from here."

Shaz, baffled, retreated. He had executed his errand.

While the masters were at breakfast, Lucretia Borgia, with a casual air, her own infant in her arms, entered the dining room, ostensibly to ask whether the coffee was hot. "Mem so triflin', cain't trus' him to have it hot," she said at first. As an afterthought she relayed Belshazzar's tidings.

"Whyn't you say?" asked Hammond, startled in his satisfaction, pushing back his chair. "Whut kind?"

"I sayin', suh, right now. I never axed whether it wench or buck," Lucretia Borgia shrugged.

"Eat your breakfast," said the father. "One would think it was yourn, your own."

Hammond ignored the counsel, hurried from the house, and limped toward the cabins.

"It done come. Big Pearl done had it, suh, Masta," Lucy greeted him at the door.

Big Pearl, still on the floor, rose to sitting, the naked baby in her arms, tugging at her enormous breast. "You goin' to give me somethin', Masta, suh, ain't you, Masta, suh?" she asked.

"I reckon it worth a dollar an' a new dress an' it sound. Is it soun'? Ain't anythin' missin' 'bout it?" Hammond had his misgivings of the brother and sister relationship.

He squatted by the pallet, and took the baby in his arms. He felt it over. There was nothing abnormal about the child except its size and vigor. With

its bowed legs it lunged and kicked as if trying to escape, and then it broke into a lusty, raucous, tearless cry.

"It sure a big varmint," was the master's verdict. "Raise it good, Big Pearl. Milk a-comin' all right?" he asked solicitously.

"Not a-milkin' much," said Lucy, "but she a-goin', gaugin' from the size of her titties."

"Any trouble? You ain't sick?" asked the master.

Lucy sniffed with pride. "Na, suh, no trouble at all," she said. "It jes' pop out like a seed out a peach."

Big Pearl, deprived of the sympathy she wanted, contradicted her mother. "It hurt me, hurt me bad."

Lucy made a face and shook her head at her master. "Wasn't nothin'," she said, "nothin' like when I had her over at Coign."

Hammond placed his palm on Big Pearl's forehead, but could detect no fever. He patted her shoulder and offered praise for her and her child.

When he returned to the house for his breakfast, his father had finished eating and was in the sitting room. Meg had brought him a toddy.

"It fine—a buck," he told the old man. "Ain't no more the matter than if Big Pearl never seen that Mede, than if they wasn't no kin at all. Reckon you got stren'th to walk out to look it over?"

"I've seen 'em, seen hunderds," Maxwell waved his hand in disinterest. "Ain't no more than worms at first."

"This 'un a baboon, big enough to be, 'most. Look jes' like Mede, jest like him."

"Well, whut did you reckon? Mede got him, didn't he?"

Hammond went to breakfast, but he was unable to eat. His father's lack of enthusiasm irritated the son. If he would not go out to see the new boy, he would bring the boy to the house and show him.

Going again to Lucy's cabin, he found Big Pearl sitting up on the stool, holding the child in her arms and watching Lucy as she massaged Mede upon the bed.

"You had ought to stay down yet awhile. No call fer you to be gittin' up yet," Hammond warned.

"She all right, Masta, suh," Lucy assured him. "Could be out pickin' cotton, an' there was some, right now."

"See the big sucker I brung you, Masta, suh?" asked Mede, who had not been in the cabin at the time of his master's previous call.

"You ain't brung nothin'. Any them other bucks jest as good," the master crushed the vainglory. "Time you was out choppin'. Why ain't you?"

"I's a-goin', I's goin', 'gin Lucy rub me, Masta, suh."

Hammond turned to Big Pearl and lifted the baby from her arms. "Hand here," he said. "I craves to show it." He left the cabin, carrying the child cautiously cradled against his chest.

"Whut Masta meanin' to do?" asked Big Pearl, too bewildered to weep.

"He take my sucker away." She finally burst into tears.

"Dry up. He fetch it back after while," her mother pretended an unconcern. "You ain't knowin' how much worth is that young 'un."

"He ain't a-goin' to sell it? He cain't sell it?" Big Pearl demanded excitedly.

"It ain't worth nothin' yet. You got to raise it 'fore he kin sell it," Lucy explained. "You have otherns that time; never miss it."

"Supposin' he do sell it? It hisn ain't it?" Mede laughed. "We make us anothern."

Hammond limped across the areaway, snuggling the child to his body. Blanche was up, sitting in a low chair opposite his father. He stooped before her to display his precious burden.

"They always havin' 'em," the girl grimaced. "Ugly black things."

Hammond turned with the baby to his father, who showed a greater interest. "It whole an' healthy all right," said the old man, bending forward. "An' big, big as a ham. An' a Mandingo, purentee Mandingo. Now, I reckon, you'll see there ain't no harm in breedin' kin."

"Heft him," Hammond suggested. "He solid, solid meat."

The elder man reached forward and grasped the baby by its right ankle, lifting and joggling it by one leg. The child wailed with instinctive terror of falling, to which the examiner gave no attention. "It sure a ringtail snorter. Hefts eighteen or twenty pound," he exaggerated in his pride.

Having made the estimate, he swung the child across his lap and cuddled it against him. It had stopped crying. He looked down into its unfocused eyes and explored its parts to make sure that it was whole and normally constructed. "That Mede," was his verdict. "About the bes' boar nigger we ever had. Reckon we goin' to use him on all the wenches hereinafter."

"You knowin' whut Mr. Wilson told—not to cross up Mandingo with other niggers. Makes 'em bad."

"No!" said Maxwell. "Any nigger is bad an' if he not watched. I wants 'em vig'ous. We sells 'em afore they comes scurvy an' hard to han'le."

"Whut we goin' to call it?" asked Hammond, reverting to the child.

"Time 'nough, time 'nough," said his father. "How is Ol' Mista Wilson?" he pondered.

"How he?" Hammond failed of comprehension. "I reckon he dead, this time."

"I meanin' callin' the sucker that—Ol' Mista Wilson? Good as anythin'. That whure we got him—leastwise whure we got his pappy an' mammy. He'd like it, even an' if he dead, Ol' Mista Wilson would."

"I reckon it good as any, an' you thinks," Hammond conceded. "We ain't a-sellin' it anyways."

"Sellin'?" the older man bristled. "No, suh, we ain't. It goin' to live an' die with us right here on Falconhurst. They doesn't come like that once in a coon's age."

Maxwell had ceased to annoy the baby with his mauling examination and the child had gone to sleep in his lap. He lifted it in Hammond's direction and said, "Put it back. Put it back with Big Pearl. It will be cravin' tittie an' we got to keep it a-growin'." When Hammond had taken the organism into his arms and started toward the door, the older man cautioned him, "Give Big Pearl her dollar an' tell her I say it a ringtail. Blandish her with praise an' you cravin' she have you another."

"That Mede's job," laughed Hammond as he closed the door behind him.

Lucy's baby followed her daughter's earlier than was anticipated. There was some anxiety on the part of the masters lest it might be premature, although the girl baby appeared fully developed and completely made up. Indeed, except for the comparison with Old Mister Wilson, it was tremendous, approximately twelve pounds, sinewy and viable.

An internal uneasiness assailed Lucy late in the afternoon and she could eat no supper. No novice in parturition, she knew that her time had come. By midnight her pains had become definite and localized, but she bore them with silent fortitude. They grew in frequency and intensity, until at length she reached for Belshazzar, on the floor beside her, and shook him into semi-wakefulness. Reluctantly and sleepily, he got to his feet and, following Lucy's directions, helped her to deliver the child. The chore finished, Shaz lay down again upon his pallet and resumed his slumbers, unconcerned about the fate of mother or baby.

Lucy lay exhausted but freed from pain, hugging her baby to her filling breast. Mede on the bed and Big Pearl on her pallet had not wakened, or, if they had heard the turmoil, had ignored it. Lucy, proud of her newborn, clung to it and longed for daylight that she might see it. She recognized that it was not so huge as Big Pearl's child, but by its clamant cry, which she was unable to still, and by its violent squirming against her body she knew its vigor and its will to survive. Lucy had wanted that her baby should be a boy, not for her own sake, not that she should treasure a girl the less, but that she knew a boy's greater value, especially if it were black. A black wench was of little worth, and Lucy feared her master's censure for having one.

Her foreboding, however, was wasted; for, although the birth of Old Mister Wilson had taken the edge off Hammond's enthusiasm, the young master welcomed Lucy's daughter with admiration and praise for its mother. He did not take the baby into the house for his father's inspection, but he did not fail to describe its strength and lustiness.

"That a godsend, a windfall," declared Maxwell when his son told him of the child's sex. "Hence, we don' got to fret us about our Mandingos runnin' out. We goin' to raise this one an' put it to Big Pearl's buck, soon as they growed enough. It will keep the breed alive."

Hammond shook his head in misgiving of his father's long-range project.

"Heed you do it, if I ain'tn here to carry it through," cautioned the old man, and Hammond, who had never before envisioned that his father might die, promised.

CHAPTER 41

BLANCHE, who had contemplated with an indifference that amounted to disdain the birth of Negro infants, was terrified at the prospect of her own confinement, which she knew was near. She knew that it was a painful process, for a white woman, and she remembered a Mrs. Jackson, a friend of her mother's, who had died in childbirth. She wept in self-pity as she sat opposite Maxwell with a toddy in her hand.

"Reckon mayhap I goin' to die?" she asked him. "I not wantin' to die yet, not yet awhile. I'm afeared."

Maxwell reassured the girl as best he could. "You ain't a-goin' to die," he said. "Like, won't have no trouble at all. Course," he hedged, "some does."

"I dies, an' Hammon' goin' to be sorry, sorry he treat me so," the girl wept. "He goin' to be sorry."

"Hammon' right good to you. He good to ever'body," the father defended his son. "Course, he right busy, out an' about, drivin' an' overseein'."

"He find time fer that Ellen. Don' slight her none." Blanche brushed the tears from her red eyes with the back of her hand.

"You don' un'erstan'," argued Maxwell. "Hammon' doesn' care nothin' 'bout Ellen. She jes' a nigger. He a-savin' you. You know that. His mamma, Sophy, Miz Maxwell, was always right thankful when I pestered with the wenches an' left her be."

"Yes. Only Hammon', he don' pester none only Ellen. Ifn he pleasured with the otherns, Lucy an' Lucretia Borgia, an' all of 'em, I wouldn't care none." Blanche had difficulty with the idea. "On'y he don't. It's Ellen, all the time Ellen, ever' night Ellen. Don' even look at the others, no more than at me. He sweet on Ellen. That whut he is."

"Ellen, she young an' handy an' he know she goin' to be clean. It goin' to be different after you have your boy."

"I don' care an' if I dies. I don' care. It serve him right," Blanche pouted.

The baby clothes left over from Hammond's infancy were brought down for the use of his child. Lucretia Borgia knew just where they had been laid away on an upper shelf in a wardrobe in a spare room. She found them—somewhat coarse linen, yellowed by the years, dusty, some of them unaccountably stained. They were all together, the long dresses and underskirts, twice the length of the child, the short ones for later use, and even blue calicoes, picked out with white stars, that Hammond had worn until he was four. Pinning blankets, bellybands, and soft diapers, all that might be needed were included. Lucretia Borgia put the women to the task of washing the baby clothes and drying them on the weeds in the sunshine to eliminate as much of the yellowing of age as was possible. She, herself, ironed the dresses that were decked out with pleated yokes and ruffles of hand embroidery. How many times before she had smoothed those self-same garments. She chuckled to

remember that this dress he had worn when Hammond took his first step, that when he had come down with a fit of coughing until they had despaired of his living, the other when he had first garbled her name in speech. What a tyrant he had been, but how sweet the tyranny, how peremptory, generous, even just.

When all were clean, Lucretia Borgia carried the garments into the sitting room and stacked them beside Blanche's chair. Blanche sorted them out, the long from the short. They would suffice for her child, although she had envisioned having new ones.

Maxwell watched her in silence. He revered these garments for the sake of him who had worn them. They were irreplaceable, beyond duplication. He could but wonder that Blanche should prefer new ones. Once, while she sorted them, he reached out and took a well-remembered little dress into his own hands and, gazing on it, he saw again Sophia Hammond and her infant son. Before he handed it back to his daughter-in-law, he had spilled his toddy on it and had wiped his tear-filled eyes upon its hem. He said nothing. Blanche would not understand. He was glad that Hammond was not there to see his weakness.

It was the following Thursday that Blanche had her child. (Hammond, when he got around to entering the birth in the family Bible, miscalculated, since he made it February 25, 1833, which would have been Saturday. However, it occurred on Thursday, probably on February 23rd. In recording the birth of his child, he looked back over the earlier entries and realized that he had failed to engross his marriage, which he set forth with its correct date of May 8, 1832, after the item of the baby's birth. The Bible, since none ever read in it, served no purpose except as a register of the births, marriages, and deaths of the generations of Maxwells.)

Blanche arose and came down to breakfast, eating heartily but unaccountably failing to drink the toddy that Meg mixed for her. To her husband's inquiry she replied that she was tolerably well.

"Tol'able, jes' tol'able," she said, "mindin' how I am." She had no intimation that her time had come.

Hammond went out to his work as usual. He was clearing some unused acres in preparation for planting them to corn, not because he needed the land, but to give his Negroes a task that would keep them employed. That the hands only puttered at their labor did not annoy the master. They were young. They would be busier and have to work harder when cotton planting time arrived.

It was ten o'clock by the erratic clock on the mantel when pains first assailed Blanche. At first they were only a vague discomfort which caused her to leave the sitting room and to go to her bed. Maxwell sipped his hot drink, undisturbed, and had Meg to stir up another. The day was cloudy, threatening rain. His first intimation that Blanche was in labor was a cry, a loud shriek, more of terror than of pain, followed a moment later by another

louder one. He heard Lucretia Borgia running through the hall, flat of foot, and up the stairs. He roused Alph, dozing on the floor beside his chair, and sent him to seek his young master.

"Tell him come, come quick, drop ever'thin'. Tell him Miz Blanche is sheddin' her chil'," he instructed the boy. "An' if you don' hurrah, I go to lambaste you, the worse lambastin' you ever got," he threatened. "Now, hurrah, quick."

The boy left the room at a trot and Maxwell heard him slam a door as he left the house. He also heard rapid footsteps on the floor above him, and another shriek. He got to his feet and wandered down the hall, uncertain as to whether to climb the stairs, when he met Lucretia Borgia at the foot of them, hastening toward the kitchen.

"She havin' it. Miz Blanche havin' it. She hurtin' powerful bad," she informed her master without stopping in her progress.

"I reckoned," he said to her disappearing back. He lingered at the base of the stairs, undecided as to whether to ascend. There was another scream of anguish, more audible here than in the sitting room.

Lucretia Borgia returned from the kitchen carrying a large bucket of steaming water in one hand and a sheaf of clothes piled on the other arm. "Take here, suh," she ordered her master. "Stan' outn my way." As she hastened up the steps, she called over the banister, "That Tense wench, she ain't no help, no help at all."

Maxwell realized that he could be of no help either and retraced his steps to the sitting room, where he did not sit down, but toddled back and forth across the floor to relieve his anxiety. Scream followed scream, but they seemed to grow weaker. Meg appeared with an unordered toddy on a salver, which his master accepted. The boy was wide-eyed with interest in the proceedings upstairs and with fear begotten of the cry of the white woman.

"Miz Blanche droppin' her sucker, suh, Masta?" he asked with enthusiastic innocence.

Maxwell's open palm crashed against the impertinent child's cheek, hurting the arthritic hand more than the cheek. The boy did not know for what he was punished, since he had intended his question to be courteous. But white men were strange. One never knew how they would respond. Meg's lower lip dropped as if he were about to cry, not from pain but from rebuff, and he retreated to the kitchen.

Alph returned out of breath. He had hurried to find his master, as he was instructed, and had run all the way back.

"He comin', Masta, suh. He comin'. Masta, comin' fas' as he kin," he reported between gasps.

"Come here an' take a swig of toddy. You petered out runnin'," said the master, who, repenting of his temper to Meg, made amends with indulgence to his brother.

The screams issuing from the house gave Hammond to know why he had

been sent for even before he entered. "How long she been carryin' on?" he asked his father and without waiting for a reply proposed, "I goin' to sen' fer Murrey, put a nigger on a mule an' send."

"Lucretia Borgia's up with her. She goin' to be all right. Hurtin' though, seem like. Better git Murrey though, I reckon. Ain't much of a doctor. I don' trus' him but he the bes' they is," concurred Maxwell.

"I'll sen' Mem, I reckon. Otherns too young an' don' know the way," suggested Ham tentatively, and the absence of reply implied his father's consent. He went to the kitchen to find Agamemnon and to give him his instructions.

He returned to the sitting room with the assurance that Mem was on his way to summon the physician. He seated himself in a chair, but could not stay quiet, and rose and limped back and forth across the room. He shuddered at the screams that came from above. "Reckon I better go up? Reckon I kin help do somethin'?" he asked his father.

"Jest be in Lucretia Borgia's road," replied the father. "She on her high hoss, mindin' me to stan' one side. She goin' to slap you down, you git in her way. You'd think I her servant, 'stead of her mine."

"Tense helpin' her, I reckon."

"She sayin' Tense ain't no account," said Maxwell.

Conversation languished. Father and son had nothing to communicate to each other, and yet they were as one, listening for the cries that came from above and evaluating the agonies that had brought them forth. Both suffered with the girl who was struggling to produce an heir for them. The shrieks subsided into groans, which grew less frequent. The older man believed that this betokened a growing weakness, an exhaustion of the woman in labor, but he did not say so to his son lest he aggravate the apprehension that he knew was in the young man's heart.

The clock ticked away crazily on the mantelpiece. Maxwell was so used to its click-clack that he had ceased to notice it, but now it impinged on his consciousness and he marked each passing minute. Before Memnon had had time to reach Benson, Maxwell was rising periodically to patter to the window to scan the driveway for his return, or rather for the arrival of Doctor Murrey.

Hammond climbed the stairs for word of the state of his wife. Walking down the hall, he rapped with his knuckles on the bedroom door before he opened it. Lucretia Borgia was bent above the bed.

"I takin' care Miz Blanche. It mos' here. It comin'. You go on downstairs an' set down, Masta, suh, an' don' hender me," Lucretia Borgia looked up to command. "Ain't goin' to be no dinner fer you an' yo' papa, nor fer none of us, savin' whut Dite an' Ellen kin set," she added.

The tone of the woman's words braced Hammond's spirit. He embraced the injunction for patience. The wails of his wife no longer cut him like a knife.

Memnon returned. He had found the doctor, who had said that he would come. Hammond settled down to wait for his arrival, secure that when he

came he would deliver the baby quickly. Toward two o'clock the screams ceased; the silence was oppressive, more painful to the husband than the wails had been. He wondered whether his wife's strength might be completely spent, even whether she might have died.

A heavy step upon the stair! Lucretia Borgia was coming down. Hammond was exhausted, expecting the worst. Lucretia Borgia came into the room, cradled in her arms a swathe of white clothes. Protruding from the clothes was the head of a child, red and amorphous. Lucretia Borgia was all a-grin with satisfaction. She went first to her young master and bowed to display her precious burden, and then to Maxwell.

"How Miz Blanche come on?" Hammond demanded.

"She sleepin' now, I reckon," the woman said. "She jest 'bout petered a-havin' it."

Hammond breathed easier.

"He ain't very big," Maxwell looked at the child critically. "Like, he'll grow."

Lucretia Borgia hugged the baby to her chest. "He? It ain't no he," she announced.

Maxwell's viscera shrank within him. Not a boy! He had wanted a boy. But he made no comment.

Hammond looked again at his child's face. "It's gotch-eyed, like Charles," he declared.

And it was. The eyes were distinctly crossed, not with the normal strabismus of the newly born, but with a divergence which would prove permanent. Why? Charles in Natchez had expressed the hope that the child would not be cross-eyed. Had his kinship with his sister had anything to do with the phenomenon, Hammond cogitated.

The least he could do was to go up to see the mother, but when he came, she was sleeping. Tense crept softly across the room to let him in, her finger to her lips. He stood by the bedside and looked down on the exhausted girl, sleeping on her back, her hair drawn back in a long braid. What if the child was a girl? What if its eyes were crossed? What if it was small and wanting in vigor? She had done her best, he reasoned compassionately. Perhaps her next child would be a sturdy boy.

When he went downstairs again, Lucretia Borgia still held the baby in her arms, jostling it up and down to quiet it and looking devotedly into the tiny, wrinkled face.

"Who you plannin' to suck it?" queried Maxwell.

"Its mamma ifn she kin, if her milk come good," Hammond answered casually.

Lucretia Borgia turned away in repugnance at the proposal, but interposed no word.

"No white lady goin' to suck her chil'. Poor trash, mayhap sometimes when

they ain't got no wench come fresh. Spoils 'em, makes their titties hang down," explained Maxwell.

"We ain't got no right fresh wench, our own self," Hammond objected.

"Let me, Masta, suh," proposed Lucretia Borgia. "My sucker most weaned, an' I got milk yet. Plenty milk."

"Your milk too ol', an' you too ol'," Maxwell shook his head. "You always wantin' to git into things, always wantin' to be It."

"Lucy the freshest we got," suggested Hammond.

"She too ol', too," said the older man. "Milk from a young wench always better, sweeter like."

"Then Big Pearl is all we got," sighed the boy.

"That black gyascutus in the house!" scoffed Maxwell. "She cain't walk, she got to gallop, knockin' things aroun'. Besides she got Wilson. Ol' Mista Wilson, growin' like he is, take a lot of milk."

"See how Big Pearl treat that young 'un!" said Lucretia Borgia. "Throwin' him aroun', jest like he a bag of oats, jest like he a iron baby."

"Course, Lucy kin help out with Wilson, need come, an' leave Big Pearl's milk fer Sophy," Maxwell reasoned.

"Sophy?"

"Sophy," Maxwell repeated. "Goin' to name her Sophy, I reckoned, after her grandma."

The father's silence was an acquiescence. "Lay her down," he told Lucretia Borgia, "an' fetch Big Pearl."

The black girl, when she came, filled the door like some vast feral thing. She was decked out in her red dress, and her naked child was slung limply over her arm. "You wantin' me, Masta, suh?" she asked.

"Big Pearl," Hammond turned to her, "how you milkin'?"

Big Pearl unbuttoned her dress and exposed an enormous, full and rounded breast, the red nipple of which stood upright in its dollar-sized corona. "Me milkin' good, Masta, suh," she said, looking about the room in wonderment. She had never before been admitted into the house.

"Come here," Hammond commanded. "Don' be afeared. An' kneel down." He handled the full breast and when he squeezed the nipple, a stream of milk squirted from it. He opened her dress further and withdrew her other breast and squeezed it. "Show Papa," he said.

The girl crawled on her knees toward the older man, who stroked the black breasts with approval, leaned forward and sucked a mouthful of milk and savored it. He nodded to his son.

"You got a new mist'ess," Hammond explained to Big Pearl. "Miz Blanche, she jest had her chil'. You goin' to suck it. Goin' to stay in the house an' eat white vittles, lots of 'em, to make you milk good."

"But, Mede—," Big Pearl interposed.

"Nev' min' Mede. They are other sluts, he needin' one," said Maxwell.

"You goin' to give suck to your new mist'ess, Miz Sophy," Hammond went on.

"Yas, suh, Masta, suh," said the girl.

"Got to han'le Miz Sophy gentle-like. She right frail. Not go flingin' her aroun' an' droppin' her aroun' like that lummox on your arm there," and Hammond patted and pinched Wilson's buttocks in admiration.

"Yas, suh, no, suh, Masta," responded Big Pearl uncertainly, drinking in her instructions.

"An' always see Miz Sophy have enough afore you lets Wilson to your tits. He kin take whut left over, whut she don' crave. Un'erstan'? Feed Miz Sophy first," the master continued. The girl said that she understood.

"She wear clothes an' sleep in a cradle," her master explained. "Lucretia Borgia here will show you how to change her an' keep her clean."

"Whut you aimin' to do with Ol' Mista Wilson, here?" Big Pearl asked. "I keepin' him, too?"

"Course you keep him, jest like you is now, providin' you takes good care your little mist'ess."

Lucretia Borgia lifted the baby girl gently and placed her in Big Pearl's free arm. Big Pearl looked down upon the tiny, cross-eyed face and emitted a scream of delight, raised the child in her arm and smothered it with kisses. "Ain't it sweet, ain't it sweet, so white an' red!" she cried. "You my mist'ess, my sweet mist'ess! I goin' to be you milk-mammy!"

"Ol' Mista Wilson's nose is out of joint," Maxwell laughed.

"I reckon she milkin' enough fer two," commented Hammond.

Time ceased to have meaning. No longer did the ticking of the clock impinge upon Maxwell's awareness. That Doctor Murrey did not arrive was now of no importance. Memnon reavowed that he had seen the doctor at his home in Benson and that he had promised to come, but Mem was hardly to be trusted. He believed that he was telling the truth, but there was no knowing to whom he had talked or what had been said. Mem feared doctors, believed that they carved people alive, especially black men, and his traffic with Murrey, if at all, had been as brief as possible. If the birth of the child had been prolonged or if it had gone amiss, the blame would have fallen upon Memnon, but, since all was well, he escaped with small censure.

CHAPTER 42

THE weather turned warmer after it began to rain, first in a steady drizzle, and later with pelting and intermittent showers. It was a dreary afternoon—a good afternoon for toddies before a slow-burning fire. All had gone well, except the sex of the child, but the acceptance of the name he had so casually and cannily bestowed upon it had mollified Maxwell's displeasure. He revised his vision of a handsome, alert, and precocious grandson, one that should be to Hammond what Hammond had been to him, into an equally fatuous vision of a granddaughter as beautiful, charming, gracious, and complacent as that Sophia who had given him Hammond. With Hammond blood from both sides of her house, he foresaw a paragon of womanhood.

Even though the services of Doctor Murrey had not been required, Maxwell was disappointed that he had not come. He had little confidence in the man's skill, but, such as it was, it was not fitting that a planter's child should be born without its benefit. Besides, Doctor Murrey enjoyed corn whiskey, and Maxwell had foreseen a pleasant interval, after the doctor's task was accomplished, of toddies before the fire and an interchange of gossip.

The erratic clock had just struck five when Maxwell heard in the lane the approach of horses, which took him to the window, where he recognized the doctor's vehicle, a kind of hooded calash, drawn by a team of perpetually weary bays. Despite that he was no longer needed, he was glad that the doctor had come; now they could have their seance, and it was so late that perhaps the doctor could be persuaded to remain for supper, possibly to spend the night.

He called for Memnon to open the door, but heard the patter of Meg's bare feet running to forestall Mem's welcome. He watched a white youth wind the reins around the whip on the dashboard and alight from the rig awkwardly. He was tall, enormously tall, emaciated, cadaverous. He made his way around the vehicle to its other side, and, reaching in, appeared to have much difficulty in helping out of the seat a man whom Maxwell recognized to be the doctor, dressed in a long coat and beaver hat. A Negro boy took the horses, while the doctor clung clumsily to the youth who tried to support him. The doctor took three steps and stopped. He stood unsteadily, supported by the youth, and then stooped forward, vomit gushing from his mouth. The doctor was drunk, dead drunk. The youth stood aside, holding the man at the length of his long arms to avoid the splatter of filth that came from the man's mouth, but he showed no impatience. He was unperturbed, used to the doctor's aberrations.

Maxwell made his way to the front door, of which Memnon had taken charge and driven Meg away.

"Not much use us comin'. He's drunk," said the youth. "Got to git him to bed, if one is ready. How the wench come along. Had it yet?"

"It ain't no wench. It Miz Maxwell," Maxwell explained.

"A white lady? Then I cain't do nothin'. Doctor don' hold with me doctorin' whites—jest yet awhile. I could have done it, an' if it been a nigger," the boy said.

"The chil' done come. It a girl chil'," Maxwell explained.

"Then we git him in bed. He be all right later on. He gits this way," the tall youth explained.

Hammond, hobbling down the stairs, overheard and called to Memnon, "Git out there an' he'p, he'p the white gen'leman, cain't you? Cain't you see? Gittin' slothy agin? Wantin' I should touch you up?"

Memnon wanted no touching up. He rolled his eyes toward his master and leaped forward to support the doctor on the other side from the youth.

"Carry him upstairs an' put him into bed—that room agin mine, not down next your mist'ess. Mus'n't rile her now, the way she is," Hammond commanded the slave.

The potbellied, florid little doctor staggered unsteadily through the door, securely embraced by Memnon. He remembered to remove his high hat in a gentleman's home, but otherwise surrendered to the slave's ministrations. Memnon led him gently up the stairs, the youth, embarrassed, falling behind. Maxwell, disappointed of the chitchat he had anticipated, retired to the sitting room again. Hammond followed the guests up the stairs, waited in the hall while the youth and Memnon removed the drunken doctor's clothes and thrust him into bed, and then he escorted the young man down the stairs.

As they entered the sitting room, Maxwell settled himself more firmly in his chair, not after all to be bilked of his conversation. "Readin'?" he asked.

"Yes, suh. Much as I kin, suh, the doctor this way," replied the tall youth still standing, diffidently.

"Set down, set down," invited the old man. "Meg," he called, "stir us a toddy."

The youth chose a chair and seated himself. "No, thanks, Mista Maxwell, suh," the boy slowly shook his head. "No toddy fer me."

Maxwell looked at him with a kind of alarm. "You're ol' enough," he opined. "Temp'ance?"

"Jest fer me," the boy said, "not fer you or nobody else. If I am goin' to make a doctor, I ain't wantin' to be like him." A feeling of disloyalty in what he had said caused him to add, "Doc, he's right good. He knows, when he ain't drinkin', only he drinks and cain't stop, seems like. Worser all the time." His curved lips grew straight with his determination, a serious glance fell from his blue eyes, he brushed his bush of black hair from his forehead with his lean hand and long fingers, and he sought to restrain a blush from his fuzz-covered cheek.

"In that case," conceded the old man, unable to find an argument to alter the boy's conviction. "Live in Benson?" he asked, accepting a toddy from Meg's tray.

"Yes, suh, now, that is, readin' with Doc Murrey an' stayin' with him," the young man made clear. "I belong out at Bankside. You knowin' me, Mista Maxwell, suh; leastwise I knowin' you. I'm Willis Smith, son of Willis Smith of Bankside Plantation," he proclaimed proudly.

"Laws! Willis Smith's boy. Course I know you, know your papa that is. Good blood!" Maxwell nodded, impressed.

"I remember back, you come to our house, buyin' saplin's, stayed fer dinner," Willis recalled. "I didn't like you that time, 'cause you wantin' my playboy off of me, only my papa wouldn't sell him."

"I recollec', I recollec'; you cried to keep him," said Maxwell. "Wouldn't eat no dinner, so afeared your papa goin' to sell him. A right likely Jew-faced yaller boy."

"That right. Out of Old Cinthy, she say by a Jew peddler. His name is Job, 'cause papa say he have so much patience with whut I do to him," Willis explained. "I gotten him yet."

"In Benson?"

"No; Job at the plantation still, suh. He married up, an' I don' want he should have to divide from his wench an' her baby. He still body-servants me when I go to Bankside."

"Willis Smith? Willis got plenty, used to have. Whut fer he makin' a doctor outn you? You the oldest, ain't you?"

"Yes, suh, I Papa's oldest boy, oldest livin', that is. Papa, he ain't rightly makin' me no doctor. I makin' me one. It my own doings. Yes, suh."

"Whut the world comin' to?" Maxwell speculated. "Fathers ain't got no say, seem like. Willis knowin' you had ought to stay on the plantation an' make a planter. He needin' you."

"The world needin' me. People, people needin' me," Willis' eyes shone with fervor. "My little sister, you remember her, Nellie, she die. Purtiest, little, yellow-haired chil' ever live, an' the sweetest, sweet as clover honey. Putered sore throat, folks said; they wouldn't let I should kiss her. I knowin' right then, when we layin' Nellie away, I goin' to make me a doctor an' not let no more Nellies die, more than I could help. Wasn't no call she should die. The doctor drunken, Murrey drunken. I ain't a-go' to be drunken—an' I go' to study hard an' learn. I goin' to save folks from dyin'."

Hammond, who had taken no part in the colloquy, interposed, "That case, one would think Doc Murrey—"

"Ain't nobody else," the boy interrupted him. "Only doctor in Benson. Besides, he good when he ain't drunken. He kin learn me, an' he got books, doctor books, big ones, that I kin read."

"All them big words," Hammond shook his head in doubtful wonder.

"I cain't say 'em, cain't soun' 'em out," Willis admitted. "But they ain't no call to. I kin spell 'em out, an' know whut they mean, most of 'em. An' Doc Murrey tells me, drivin' along, when he ain't drunken, an' shows me on

sick folks how to do. He knowin' he got to give up purty quick, an' then I got to take a-holt an' do the bes' I kin."

The youth's assurance was balanced with modesty, but sustained by a will to learn, a curiosity, and a determination to function in his vocation.

The supper-bell rang. Willis felt called upon to look at Doctor Murrey before he should eat, but suggested that the Maxwells should not delay their meal. They waited for him. He found the doctor asleep on his back, snoring lightly, and adjusted the quilts that had slipped from his neck.

"He goin' to be all right. No cause to fret," the young man announced on his return. "But we got to stay the night out. Ain't no other way. Reckon you kin sleep us?"

"Course, course," Maxwell said hospitably. "Ain't no other way. Wouldn't hear of you goin' out in this dark, rainy night."

"Then the doctor kin look at Miz Maxwell, come mornin'," said Willis by way of excusing the need to remain.

"The chil' done come," said Hammond. "Ain't needin' him now."

"I could of kotched the baby jest as good as Murrey; I helpin' him with so many, I know jest how, on'y he won't have it yet awhile. Afeared, I reckon, afeared I goin' to crowd him out."

"I ain't a-blamin' you none," Hammond allayed the apprentice's uneasiness. "Blamin' anybody, I blamin' him."

"Besides, you're young," said Maxwell.

"Ain't no trick, ketchin' a chil'. Anybody kin, 'less one comes ass-to. That case, it got to be straightened aroun'," Willis explained.

He watched with anguish as Memnon helped the old man to rise from his chair, heard him protest profanely the move to lead him to the supper room, glanced askance at the difficulty he had cutting his ham, but kept silent. Lucretia Borgia, with the supper, made up for what she deemed the scantiness of the dinner prepared by Dite and Ellen. The talk was as usual about the price of cotton and the price of slaves.

"Don' make no mind that they ain't goin' to leave us keep niggers no more, purty quick, they peterin' out so bad," opined Willis. "They all weakly-like. Goin' to die off their own self, even and they leaves us keep 'em."

"Who say we cain't keep 'em? Jest them abolition folks up at the North. Why, Andy keeps 'em, his own self, right in the President's Mansion," Maxwell argued.

"Most of 'em ailin' one way an' another. Need doctorin' up. Cain't bring 'em in no more into the country, an' they jest a-runnin' out, stock runnin' out." Willis shook his head. "They goin' to abolition their own self."

"Feed 'em," said Ham. "An' if the young ones got enough fodder, they won't run out," protested Hammond.

"An' if they wasn't worked to death afore they big an' able," said Maxwell.

"An' ifn folks used stout young studs, 'stead of used-up white overseers,

tryin' for yaller suckers. Don' make no difference if they comes weak, so long as they comes yaller, seem like," said Hammond with disgust.

"You like 'em black?" queried Willis.

"I likes 'em stout, stout an' soun'. I don' care an' if they striped. I ain't keepin' 'em to look at."

"Breedin 'em wouldn't hardly pay, if one could buy soun' saplin's to feed an' raise," Maxwell complained. "Those that has 'em won't sell, not at a price."

"I reckon it a waste to doctor 'em an' a mercy to let 'em die when they puny an' ailin'," Willis sighed. "Only I like to cure 'em, no mind how old an' weak an' black they be. I like to, an' sometimes Doctor Murrey lets me. He likes whites."

"We-uns don't have much trouble of that kin' here at Falconhurst," Hammond boasted. "One comes puny, we sell it, sells it right off, an' we don' keep 'em till they gits old on us."

"I noticed. Yourn, whut I see of 'em, seems right likely," Willis admitted, pushing back his chair and politely unbuttoning the lower portion of his vest in acknowledgment of having fed well. The gesture was supererogatory, since his body was as lean as his long arms and legs and since he was not a hearty eater.

In the return to the sitting room, Willis was forced to curb his impulse to offer support to Maxwell, whom he had heard upbraid the Negro for seeking to help him on the way toward the dining room. Willis did not know that such aid was accepted without resentment when there was no guest. The old man's frailty excited the boy's sympathy and his desire to exercise his healing arts, but he respected the other's reticence about his malady.

"I knowed it was comin', this rain, knowed it in my han's an' knees," said Maxwell, rubbing with his right hand the knuckles of his left, as he sank into his chair. "Rain a-comin', my rheumatiz backs up on me, ever' time."

"You right bad," said Willis.

"Yes. That the cause of me takin' all them toddies. Helps me, seem like," sighed Maxwell, accepting a glass which Meg had brought him.

"Corn licker for rheumatiz better outside than in," Willis suggested. "Better rubbed on than drunken." Maxwell's observation had given him the cue he had sought. He sidled his chair toward the patient, placed his hand upon his brow, felt the pulse, asked to see his tongue, all without concept of what he wanted to learn—mere gestures of diagnosis.

Maxwell relished rather than resented the attention. "I'm betterin', betterin' right along—on'y tonight, this rainin'." He shook his head. "I dreenin' it, dreenin' it through my feet, into this buck here." He reached his glass down to Alph, sprawled on the floor beside his chair and said, "Better take a swallow, boy; you be needin' it afore mornin'."

Willis looked doubtful. "It may be he goin' to git it, git it bad. Only that ain't a-goin' to git you shet of it. It jest dreen into him, not out of you,"

he explained authoritatively. He reached down and felt of the young Negro's brow solicitously.

"You reckon he gittin' it? Feel anythin'?" Maxwell asked anxiously.

"Not yet; an' even if he had, it don' mean you sheddin' it. It like this clap that's goin' aroun'," Willis expatiated. "Folks thinkin' they goin' to dreen their clap into a nigger virgin—if they kin fin' one. Don' do no good as I kin see. I know a gen'leman whut used up three of 'em and he still got it. So is they. I not a-sayin', of course, that they was all virgins, but one of 'em had ought to be, they was all so young like. Could be they ain't no nigger virgins. I ain't never seen one. Could be how the cure got started off."

"The clap—jest got to wear it down. Ain't no cure fer that," said Maxwell.

"Yaller puccoon is right good, suh. It stops the burnin'," the would-be physician declared. "Whut I give one of Papa's niggers at Bankside that got it last year. I wantin' to cut him, but Papa wouldn't hear of it. That bes'—fer a nigger. Saves it from spreadin'. Papa afeared the boy would die."

"Might as well die, I reckon," Maxwell disapproved the surgery. "So had I might as well—." He could not bring himself to complete the sentence. "If my achin' don' git better."

"Now, Papa," Hammond interposed. "You all riled about it comin' a girl. Whenever Papa git riled, his achin' gits worser."

"Whut that got to do with it? My achin' is not in my head," Maxwell bristled. "It in my han's, an' feet, an' knees, an' all over me."

"Rheumatism?" Willis pushed his chair back from the patient in resignation. "I don' know. I ain't come to that part in the books yet. That is away over under 'R'. But I'll git there. Jest wait. An' when I do—." His promise was only implied, but it gave the invalid some hope.

"You think rubbin' with corn—?" asked Maxwell tentatively.

Willis shrugged his uncertainty.

"Serpent oil? That would be better," Hammond expressed his opinion.

"That stink so bad. I'd sooner ache," Maxwell breathed.

"Serpent oil! Serpent oil! Doctor Mulbach's, or whoever's? That ain't jest only goose grease—of course, flavored up to make it smell an' colored green. It ain't never been near no snake. It the rubbin' whut does it, whut make it work," declared Willis with some indignation.

"It say on the bottle, right on the bottle—," Hammond defended the remedy.

"Whut an' if it does say?" Willis scoffed. "Kin make up anythin' and print it on the bottle. Ask Doc Murrey if it ain't goose grease."

Hammond preferred to believe the maker of the nostrum rather than this callow tyro. All doctors disparaged remedies that could be obtained without their sanction.

"I ain't usin' it, even an' if—," Maxwell affirmed with finality. "One more toddy an' I reckon I better go up. Jest one won't drunken you, Doctor Willis, an' it will warm you, retirin'."

To be called "Doctor" flattered Willis and he was tempted to acquiesce, but thought of Murrey and shook his head. "Thank you, suh, I don' aim to be like him that a-way," he said.

"I reckon how you don' crave no wench to pleasure with, neither," said Hammond. "I was jes' a-thinkin' which one."

Willis felt his white face burn with blushes to the roots of his hair. He had heard of the custom of many plantations of providing guests with a woman for the night, but he had not previously encountered it. It was not done—at least not frankly and openly—at Bankside, where his mother's scruples forbade such dalliance within the house. Of course, what occurred furtively in the cabins, she did not know about and did not care.

"I reckoned I sleepin' with Doc Murrey," he evaded a direct answer. "Ain't hardly room an' he drunk an' spread out."

"We got another bed. Ain't no call to double," said Hammond.

"Well, in that case, an' if you got a clean, young yaller," Willis faltered.

"I was thinkin' of Dite," Hammond said to his father.

"An' if you not wantin' her your own self no more," Maxwell nodded.

"I got me Ellen," said Ham. "Dite, she young, she light, an' she not musky."

"When I say 'clean,' I meanin' the clap. She ain't got the clap?" specified Willis.

Hammond laughed. "None of our niggers got it, an' none ever had it," he boasted.

"It goin' aroun'," asserted Willis, and his blush subsided as he saw that it was unobserved in the candlelight.

"It always goin' aroun'," said Maxwell, rising, and rousing Alph. He called loudly for Memnon, who came to help him to bed.

Hammond settled Willis in the bedroom at the end of the hall, next his own, and returned to the kitchen to summon Dite.

The girl giggled in her flustration. "You reckon he goin' to have me? Whut I goin' to do with my sucker?"

"I keep him good," Lucretia Borgia volunteered. "He wantin' suck, I give it to him. Now, go 'long, like Masta say. The young white gen'man right nice. I noticin' him durin' supper. Course, he young." Willis' youth justified the falling of the mantle upon Aphrodite instead of upon herself.

The following morning Doctor Murrey arose, fully sobered after his debauch. He accepted heartily Maxwell's invitation to drink before breakfast and downed his whiskey undiluted, squashing it in his mouth before he swallowed it, as if he enjoyed its flavor as well as its exhilaration. He insisted upon seeing the child he had come to deliver and praised its beauty, although no parts of it were visible except the tiny, wrinkled, red face and the dainty hands. The eyes were closed in sleep and he did not see the strabismus. The naked and sturdy Old Mister Wilson was also asleep, in Big Pearl's other arm, and, although the Doctor did his full duty in his admiration of the

white baby, his professional interest centered in the Mandingo.

"Heft it oncet, jest heft it," Maxwell urged.

"No good wakin' it," said the doctor, feeling the child's thigh.

"No harm. Jest heft it," insisted Maxwell, grasping the baby's ankle and drawing it from the mother's arm. The doctor laughed to hear the wrathful squall of the startled young thing and took the leg from the owner's hand, holding the boy from him to avoid being soiled. He jostled the baby to estimate its weight which was greater than he had deemed possible.

"Fifteen—sixteen pounds," he estimated.

"More, more; bigger than that," Maxwell urged.

"Of course, the dam here is a burly varmint," observed the doctor, handing the baby back to Big Pearl and stooping to raise her skirt to admire the bulk of her leg.

"Had ought to see the stud buck. Purentee Mandingos, both on 'em," Maxwell boasted. "Both."

"I never studied up on the tribes," shrugged the doctor, "A nigger is a nigger, I always reckoned."

"All, only a Mandingo," pursued Maxwell. "They half rhinoceros, I guess; they that stout. But they gentle and biddable as a goslin'. Never git out of hand."

As Willis entered the room he was unable to curb his blush, but his bearing was manly to the point of truculence. He wondered whether Maxwell had told the doctor about Dite, not that he feared his anger but rather his raillery. The doctor was hardly in a position for indignation.

"Did he talk your leg off?" asked the doctor, slapping the boy on the shoulders. "Does usually. Knows all there is to know about ever'thin', thinks he does."

"I kin reckon. He right in'erestin'. Knowin' a lot, so young," Maxwell assented.

"I goin' to learn him to doctor, if he don't try to learn me," laughed Murrey. "Reads books; thinks he kin learn doctorin' out of books, tells me whut's in 'em. Got to learn it from sick folks, I always tellin' him. Ain't I, Willis?"

"He sayin' how he Willis Smith's boy. I know his papa," said Maxwell. "Looks like him too, in daylight, same lengthy build, but better lookin', better put together."

"Yas, he is well set up—goin' to be when he stoutens out," the doctor nodded approvingly. "Mista Smith give him to me and said make him a doctor—the boy is set that a-way. And, by God, I will, if he don' try to go too fast."

After breakfast, the doctor sought to justify his futile visit by looking at the patient. Hammond led him and Willis to Blanche's room, where he found the girl sitting up in bed with a large breakfast before her. She shrank from the doctor, refusing to permit him to touch her, even to feel her brow for fever; anyway, it was apparent that she had none.

"Cain't I have a toddy, Doctor? Jest one," she begged. "Hammond, he won't give me none, and won't have the niggers stir me one."

"Best thing, best thing in the world," said the doctor. "All you wantin' of 'em."

"She havin' 'em all the time beforehan'," said her husband. "I reckon it time to stop. I not wantin' she should be—," Hammond checked himself out of consideration for the doctor's weakness

"Havin' 'em before, she got to have 'em now. Cain't quit right off. Got to taper—taper slow. Liable to have fits otherwise. You don' want fits."

Hammond gravely acknowledged that he did not.

"That, toddies, hot as Miz Maxwell kin take 'em, an' her in bed, not gittin' out too soon is all, all she need," the doctor declared. "Good as new, ten days or two weeks."

Willis stood in the background, listening, learning, saying no word. Blanche's eyes lingered on him in admiration. She would not have shrunk from his touch. Lucretia Borgia had already told her that Dite had been Willis' bedmate and she was jealous of Dite's fortune.

The men went downstairs, but after a short while there was a knock on the bedroom door. Tense opened it to Willis, a steaming goblet in his hand. He had mixed and brought the toddy which Murrey had prescribed. Not trusting Tense to serve it, he carried it himself to the bedside, and with his left arm supported Blanche's waist as she drank from the glass in his right hand. Willis was unsure whether it was admiration for the girl's blondness or his vocation as a healer that had prompted him to detach himself from the gentlemen and return to the room.

Blanche drained the glass slowly to prolong the apprentice physician's embrace of her body. Her breasts were filling up and beginning to itch. She was tempted to tell the young doctor about them and show them to him, but out of modesty refrained. Instead, grasping his hand in both of hers, she raised it to her brow and let it rest there. He asked to see her tongue, and then felt of her pulse, which beat rapidly. Later he laid his ear against her breast to listen to her heart. He was not sure of the symptoms he sought; he was merely playing at being a physician.

"You right good an' powerful kind," said Blanche. "I not afeared of you at all. I afeared o' the othern."

"There ain't no call to be afeared. I craves that you git well and up. That is all," the boy responded. "That toddy goin' to help you right smart."

"You reckon? I feels better a'ready," the girl declared. "I goin' to have 'em—all I craves of 'em. That whut that doctor done say. Wasn't it?"

Willis said that it was.

"Won' have you to hol' me up while I drink 'em though," said Blanche, surveying the standing boy.

"I comin' back, in passin' by, to see how you comin' on," the youth promised.

"Come soon, come often," Blanche urged.

Willis glanced at Tense before he stooped and kissed his patient.

As Tense showed him out the door, he seized her arm and guided her into the hall where, through her dress, he felt of her immature breasts and patted her buttock.

"You good an' not tell nothin', whut I did, I goin' to ast your masta kin I have you next time I come. We have good time, pesterin'," he told the innocent girl.

Tense answered him, "Yas, suh, Masta, suh." There was no other reply to a white man.

Tense was not sure what she was under admonition not to reveal. She had seen the young man kiss her mistress, but did not know it was not a convention among the whites, whose nature and customs were inexplicable. Nor did she resent the young man's boldness to herself, which was a white prerogative, and besides which she found it pleasurable, though vaguely disturbing.

CHAPTER 43

IN eight days Blanche was able to come down the stairs with Lucretia Borgia's aid. In the interval, she had quieted her impatience with toddies, which, in view of Doctor Murrey's advice, Hammond no longer denied her. He made it a practice to go to her room mornings and evenings, and, when he had time, at midday, but did not relish the chore, since the girl was always tipsy or peevish or both. He was, however, glad to find her sitting opposite his father in the sitting room when he returned for dinner, even if she was sipping a toddy.

To her husband's inquiry, Blanche replied, "I reckon I strengthin' some. I reckon I is. I allow as these toddies, the doctor say about, helpin' me strengthen." The doctor's advice justified her drinking as much as she chose to drink.

Toward her child Blanche was, and remained, as indifferent as though she had not borne it. She ignored Big Pearl except to tell her to take one of the babies from her presence when it cried. This was usually Sophia, who, without diagnosible illness, failed to thrive. Old Mister Wilson, on the other hand, a glutton at the breast, grew and prospered and seldom cried. Once, when the boy's impatience for Big Pearl's breast excited him into a bit of crying, Blanche ordered the black mother to take him to the kitchen and spank him until he should give them some peace. Big Pearl was by no means reluctant, but her blows upon the rounded rump only aggravated the noise which endured until the baby fell asleep from exhaustion.

The favoritism the nurse showed for her master's child was not wholly sycophancy, but a true preference for the small, doll-like, white Sophia over the big, robust and self-willed, dusky Wilson. Big Pearl truckled to Blanche and cowered before her, but she loved Blanche's baby better than her own and her instructions to give it precedence in care were supererogatory. Such was her own choice. She was unable to keep her thick lips from Sophia's face and body. She lifted her tenderly and cuddled her against her sturdy bosom to still her fretfulness, whereas to Wilson's occasional tantrums she was indifferent, lifted him as often by a single arm or leg as by his body, and cuffed him soundly whenever he annoyed her.

For Big Pearl, Old Mister Wilson served a single purpose—to drain her breasts, which Sophia was unable to do. She ate hugely and secreted milk accordingly. After the white baby had vacillated between waking and sleeping at her dinner, Big Pearl enjoyed the zeal with which her black boy attacked her breasts and drew from them the final drop. In this detumescence the big girl felt something like love for her son.

While Maxwell and Blanche sipped their toddies, he paid little heed to her frequent eulogies of Willis Smith and her speculation about why the boy had not kept his promise to come again.

"Not that I a-carin' an' if he don' never come, only he hadn't ought to say like that," she always wound up.

"They's lots of sickness aroun', an' with Murrey drunk, I reckon the boy is powerful busy," Maxwell replied. "I'd as soon have him as Murrey anyways, even an' if he ain't full fledged."

"Ruther, ruther have him," sighed Blanche.

Blanche had been up two weeks when Lucretia Borgia one day accosted Hammond as he passed through the kitchen.

"I reckon you had better do somethin' about Dite, suh, Masta," she suggested. "She got somethin', sure has. Kotched it from that young white boy whut come a-doctorin'."

Hammond questioned Aphrodite. There was no doubt about her malady and only one person from whom she could have contracted it.

"The damn son-of-a-bitch," he ranted to his father. "Spreadin' the clap aroun', 'stead of curin' folks. Spreadin' it, jest a-spreadin' it. I feel like takin' my gun into Benson an' shootin' him dead."

"That Doctor Smith never do it. I know he never, Hammond." Blanche protested. "Ain't only a nigger, no way."

"Nigger or not a nigger, it could be all on 'em, ever' one we got," Hammond said, sinking to a chair, his face in his hands. "An' we keepin' our stock so clean. Never had nothin', nothin' before."

"Nev' mind, Ham," Maxwell sought to appease his son. "Take Dite's sucker offn her?"

"I shore did. I done that quick. I don' reckon he got it yet awhile."

"An' we sen' fer Redfield. He do somethin', dry it up, or somethin'," the father continued. "It ain't bad anyways. Half the niggers on half the plantations in Alabama git it one time an' another—not to say the white owners."

"That the reason he, that Smith, talk so much about the clap an' how he cure it—knowin' he got it his own self." Hammond rose and walked the floor to refrain from weeping.

"You'll be seein' Redfield, come Sat'day in Benson. Ast him. Tell him to stop by, passin' along."

"I was aimin' to put Dite and Mede together first thing, seein' the kind of suckers he bringin'," Hammond said. "Now we cain't."

Redfield lost little time. He came on Sunday morning, and after a toddy with the Maxwells, father and son, examined Dite. To the veterinarian it was something of a joke that the Maxwell slaves should have a venereal infection.

"Long time, long time you ain't had nothin', Mista Warren. I recollec' me back ten or twelve year ago you had a buck—," he harked back.

"Bought him, bought him my own self, had it a'ready," Maxwell nodded. "But I sol' him agin, 'fore he done nothin', 'fore he spread it aroun'. Only Ham don't crave to sell this one. Aimin' to keep her, her the mother of his chil', an' all. Don't want he should sell his own flesh."

"Well, it soon wear out," Redfield predicted. "Ain't much to do with it, save not to spread it." He drew a packet of cloth from his pocket and added, "I brung along some dried weed the Widder gathered an' say it right good. She say it sovereign, in fac'. Me? I ain't sayin'. Might try it. Make a tea. It bitterer than gall."

"That Smith!" Hammond spat. "Him goin' to make him a doctor!"

"Might be anybody," argued Redfield. "You never had it. I have, many's the time; and I reckon your papa—when he was young."

The gentlemen had returned to the sitting room. Blanche's step was heard on the stairs, and it was necessary to change the subject. Meg brought more toddies, including one for Blanche, who noted a momentary silence and wondered what the talk had been about.

Redfield did not tarry long, but at his departure Hammond insisted upon his looking at Mede, who was in excellent fettle, and at Mede's progeny, which won his enthusiastic approval.

"Don' turn him to that fireship, whutever you do," the doctor cautioned. "It will weaken him down, sure."

"Dite, you meanin'. No, suh," said Hammond. "I reckon I knowin' that much."

Blanche did not have to wonder long what the talk had been about, since she learned from the servants—at second, third, and fourth hand, and distorted—the gist of it. Even then, however, she failed to understand the situation, since Dite was not confined to her bed. Blanche wished that the victim might have been Ellen.

CHAPTER 44

PLANTING time came early. Steady winds had dried the fields and the clods crumbled as the plows turned the earth. For Hammond, it was a busy season and he impressed all the larger slaves into service, including Mede, whom he put behind a plow to break the land before the rains should come. He did not go to Benson on Saturday, and even Sunday the plowmen worked. It was Hammond's intention to make up for it by allowing the slaves a weekday holiday later in the season when they could be spared. He felt some scruples about depriving them of their Sunday rest, which was an old plantation policy, but there was no grumbling.

The first Hammond knew of the arrival of Mad Church was that on coming to the house for dinner he found in the barn the Church horses, which he recognized to be Moonlight and Too Sweet. Moonlight was followed by a stylish, long-legged, chestnut filly, the probable result, as Hammond calculated, of the excursion upon which Hammond had first met Mad at Fairfax tavern. The young stallion had turned two years and had grown into a handsome colt with a reachy neck sloping between long withers, a classically small head, small ears, and the eye of an angel. Hammond remembered the erratic youth's determination to give him the colt, his most precious possession, and wondered whether Mad had come to press the gift upon him. He was nettled at having his plowing interrupted by the visit, however short it should be.

He went into the house to find his father, his wife, and his friend drinking toddies. Blanche was tightly laced in her best brown dress, shoes on her feet, her hair combed. He was proud of her. Madison Church, in a plum-colored, long coat, as nearly a duplicate as he could obtain of the one Hammond had worn to his wedding, rose to meet him. He pumped Hammond's hand warmly, wiped a tear from his eye with his left hand, and then, unable to curb his emotions, fell forward and buried his face on Hammond's chest, weeping.

"Whut ails you? Whut fer you cry? I ain't done nothin'," Hammond remonstrated, baffled.

"Seein' you agin," Mad sobbed. "Jest seein' you. It jest come over me. That all. I cain't he'p. You my frien', my bes' frien'. Now I with you."

"Well, you here, ain't you? I jes' the same. Curb your cryin'."

"I cain't. A-seein' you. Jest to think." The big jowled youth resumed his chair. "I been a-layin' off ever since I seen you. Been aimin' to come." He drew a soiled handkerchief and wiped his eyes.

"I knowin' you here, seein' your hosses. That young stud a-makin' up good."

"Shore is. An' Triumf here. You ain't seen Triumf," said Mad, dragging the boy forward from where he was sitting on the floor beside the chair. "Ain't it growed? An' you know them whup marks on its back, they all heal up an' go 'way."

Triumph wore the same brass-buttoned blue clothes that Meg had worn to the wedding, but he had grown so much that his wrists protruded from the sleeves, the breeches reached hardly more than to mid-thigh and were so tight that they threatened to burst. He came forward, grinning confidently and stood wide based before Hammond, who spanned the boy's shoulders and felt of his biceps approvingly.

"He growin', right meaty," Hammond nodded without concern. "I reckon you not cravin' to sell him back, are you?"

"Sell it back? Sell it back? No! No, suh! I ain't sellin' it back. I wouldn't take a purty fer it. Would I, Triumf?" Mad pulled the young slave back to sit on his knee, embraced him and gave him a swallow from his toddy goblet. "It mine—my play-buck. Ain't nobody gittin' it."

"You right big, havin' a play-boy," commented Maxwell, "seem like."

"I don't care. It mine an' it goin' to stay mine," affirmed the boy.

"Mista Church ain't got no wife yet, Grampa," Blanche offered in extenuation. "Is you, Mista Church, suh? Got to have somepin'." Blanche had begun addressing Maxwell as "Grampa" soon after Sophia's birth.

For answer Mad made a grimace of disgust.

At dinner the twins swung their peacock fans, and Triumph stood beside Mad's chair. Now and again the master fed the young slave a tidbit from his fork, for which purpose it appeared that the boy had taken up his position. Meg stared in open-mouthed wonder at the breach of manners, and Maxwell gave no voice to his annoyance. Blanche crooked her small finger in ostentatious elegance, and smirked her approval of all Mad did or said. She thought it might be pleasant to have Tense beside her and to feed her an occasional bite, not the best of the viands such as Mad was feeding to Triumph, but the fat and gristle, such as she herself could not eat.

Blanche remembered Madison Church in his own home, but this was not the same young man. He had filled out and broadened in the meanwhile, and in his long, plum-colored coat, erect and valiant, he appeared to her distinguished. The trouble was that Madison ignored her—civilly, but markedly, ignored her. It piqued her interest in him.

Rising from the table, Hammond excused himself. "I'm plowin'," he explained. "Got to git it done while the weather holds. You rest with Papa and Miz Maxwell till come evenin', an' then we talk. Hopin' you goin' to stay a spell at Falconhurst, suh."

"You losin' one," Mad broke in. "They tellin' you losin' one."

"Losin' one, one whut?" Hammond wrinkled his brow.

"One. One servant. They say it runned," said Mad casually.

Hammond had forgotten Ace, charged off the loss. "Yes, time back," he admitted. "Brother of yourn, the one I sold you. He gone—North, I reckon."

"It not North at all. I know whure it be," Madison announced calmly.

"Whure? Whure is it?" Hammond followed Mad in his use of the neuter gender for a slave.

"Tied to a sycamore."

"A sycamore? Whure?"

"Out yander a piece." Mad waved his arm vaguely.

"Whyn't you say? Come on, let's git him. He goin' to starve." Hammond pictured Ace as having been tied to a tree ever since his escape.

"It's easy. It ain't hongry. I leave it vittles," Madison explained, however cryptically, without show of haste.

"Come on, let's git him," Hammond repeated excitedly.

"One thing," Mad specified. "You ain't goin' to flog it. It ain't done nothin' only jest run."

"Ain't that enough?" Maxwell demanded.

"I always a-sayin' Ace is a conjure," Blanche interposed without purpose.

"I ain't goin' to jest flog him? I goin' to hide him down, take the hide right offn him. Only way to do a runner. I never the other time, an' see? He run agin."

"Only to jest see its brother," Madison minimized the offense. "You ain't sayin' you ain't a-goin' to, I ain't a-showin' you whure I got it hid," he threatened.

" 'Tain't legal—holdin' out a nigger away from its owner," Maxwell argued. "You wouldn't do that, Mista Church. It ain't legal."

"Legal or ain't," Madison sniffed. "You got to promise, promise you ain't goin' to flog it."

"You isn't goin' to leave the white gent'man whup Ace? Is you, Masta?" Triumph demanded, and his owner placed his arm about the slave's shoulder to assure him.

Hammond saw Mad's earnestness, that he was immovable. "Well, not this time. I won't. But next time he runs. A runner always runs," he promised, almost hopeful for another escape.

"Nor you ain't a-go' to do nothin' else to it, like collarin' it, or starvin' it down. You goin' to treat it good," Mad specified. "Ain't even goin' to cuss it."

Ace was the Maxwell's, their property, their chattel, theirs to do with as they saw fit. Who was this jackanapes to dictate to them? Hammond had made no reservations in his promise not to flog the runaway, but to let him go without any punishment whatever was courting further trouble, not only with Ace, but it was a bad example to set before the other slaves. Hammond hesitated.

"Triumf, here, a-wantin' it. My mamma a-wantin' it. Emmaline a-wantin' it. I a-wantin' it, my ownse'f," Mad went on. "My gran'pa only die, and he old, I comin' back here an' I buyin' it offn you, no matter how much. I goin' to be rich. No matter how much. I not a-wantin' it hurt."

"That case—," Maxwell made a reluctant concession. "Course, by rights, he had ought to be made a sample out of."

Hammond looked at his father and nodded. "All right, then. I won't do nothin' to him—this time. Come on an' lets go git him."

"I knowed you wouldn't," Madison said, as if the promise had been voluntary.

"Come on, let's git the hosses," Hammond urged impatiently. "The plowin' kin go."

"Ain't no hurrah. We jest et," said Mad, massaging a full stomach as he settled into a chair in the sitting room. "It won't git loose. It chained good. Besides, I got to feed Triumf."

"The cook, she feed him after we gone."

"Triumf goin' along, too. He go along with me whurever, an' I always feed it my own se'f, don' I, Triumf? Jest like I always feed the hosses, my own se'f, me an' Triumf."

Madison refused to make haste. He drank an after-dinner toddy with the Maxwells before he went to the kitchen to supervise Triumph's meal, which was already half-eaten. Much to the unvoiced vexation of Lucretia Borgia, Madison stalked about the kitchen, bringing fresh food from the pots to where the boy stood against a table, gorging. Mad was solicitous lest his slave should not have enough to eat and lest he should not eat enough of what he had. He hovered over him, drenched his pone with gravy, cut up his meat, and from time to time, like a mother bird, lifted a piece and placed it in the boy's mouth.

Meg and Alph sniggered in their amused embarrassment at the white man's solicitude and made an effort to keep their eyes upon the soiled plates of their masters, from which it was their custom to eat. Their plates were heaped with food to which they had helped themselves and which it required no urging for them to eat.

"Gittin' enough? Wantin' another egg?" asked Madison with his hand on Triumph's shoulder.

The boy grinned at his master and shook his head.

"Got to say 'No, suh, Masta, suh'," cautioned Madison. "Mus'n't jest shake your haid 'No'. Got to learn to be nice. Whut these others goin' to think?"

The boy repeated the formula, shame-faced.

"Had enough? Sure? Didn' eat nothin', seem like," said the master.

Triumph merely nodded his repletion and turned from the table; and Madison failed to note the omission of the polite affirmation. He felt of the boy's stomach to make sure it was full, and, withdrawing the handkerchief in which he had earlier wept, wiped the accumulation of eggs and gravy from around the boy's mouth, spat on the handkerchief to moisten it, and removed the last traces of food from his face. Triumph accepted these ministrations as if they were his due, although he had not forgotten the neglect he had undergone at the hands of his former owner. He knew he was at his master's disposal, a thing, a domestic animal, to keep or to sell, to pamper or to abuse, and did not resent Mad's mollycoddling attentions. His passivity was complete.

"Change his didy?" Maxwell asked as Mad guided the boy, hand on his shoulder, back to the sitting room.

Mad perceived no sarcasm in the question and answered it factually. "It don' wear none. It housebroke—good. Ain't you, Triumf?"

Hammond, to forestall his father's taunts, proposed to Mad that they hasten. He desired, moreover, to see and retrieve his mustee and to return to the supervision of his plowing. "I goin' to sen' fer the hosses," he said.

"No! No! Don't send. We will saddle up, our own self. Too Sweet will kick the lights outn a strange nigger," Madison warned, rising and beckoning to Triumph.

Mounting Eclipse, Hammond rode to his fields for a survey of his plowing hands, while Mad and his boy dawdled with the feeding, watering, and currying of their horses before they would saddle them. Mad pampered his horses just as he pampered his slave, urging them to eat and drink, brushing and rubbing their hides, kissing their noses in his admiration for their beauty.

"Got to ride slow-like, acause of Merry Legs," said Mad atop Moonlight. "We rode slow all the way fer her, a-comin'."

"Whut is Merry Legs," demanded Hammond.

"The filly foal," explained Mad. "She tender yet an' cain't keep up."

"Too Sweet, he kin, Masta, suh," said Triumph from the back of the young stallion. "He most as stout as his mamma."

"With only you on him, he is," Mad admitted. "I ain't wantin' I should ride him fur nor fas', my own self, yet awhile. He got to git his growth first."

"Goin' to make a racin' hoss outn him?" Hammond asked, running his eyes with approval over the colt.

"I would, only you got to whup a racer. Ain't nobody goin' to lay a lath to Too Sweet."

"An' he don' win races, ain't nobody goin' to bring their mares to him," Hammond said.

Madison spat. "I ain't a-goin' to have him fer no stud hoss. He don't want to be. He nice. Too Sweet is."

The party ambled out the lane, Hammond on Eclipse riding ahead, impatient of the delay for the foal. Madison caught up with him and at the road turned left. Blanche had come out upon the gallery to wave as they passed the house, at variance to her wonted indifference.

The springtime was lush, weeds bordered the road, and dogwood was beginning to blossom, but Hammond saw none of it. His thoughts were behind him and pertained only to plows turning the soil from which cotton should spring. This expedition was a waste of his time; Mad could as well have brought his mustee to Falconhurst as to have secreted him wherever it was for which they were bound.

"How much farther we goin'? Whure at you got him?" Hammond demanded after a mile. He had surmised that Ace's hiding place was not far.

"Down this way a piece, and then off," was all the information Mad would offer him.

Some two miles farther along the main road, Mad swung his mare and

faced Hammond. "Now, you ain't goin' to do nothin' to it, whup it or nothin'? You promised," he demanded.

Hammond gave his word again.

Leaping a small ravine, Mad plunged his horse into a wood beside the road. Hammond could see hoofmarks in the sparse grass and a broken path where weeds had been recently disturbed. Beyond the forest was an open meadow and beyond that a grove of sycamores toward which Madison galloped, followed by Hammond and Triumph, the small filly bringing up the rear. Reaching the edge of the grove, Mad dismounted to avoid the branches, and, throwing his bridle over Midnight's head, he led her among the trees.

On the ground, against a small sycamore, standing aside from the rest of the grove, sat Ace with his back to the trunk, his arms shackled to the tree behind him. A pan of food, covered with ants, was by his side, but out of reach of his shackled hands. Mad, with consideration, had set the pan beside the boy before he had chained him and had afterwards overlooked the fact that he should be unable to reach it. Ace's eyes were red and tears of impotence and frustration had trickled down and dried upon his soiled cheeks. He trembled in his fear.

"I won't do it no more, Masta, suh," he shuddered when he saw Hammond. "I ain't a-goin' to run, suh. I work, I be good. Don' whup me, please, suh. Don' whup me." He struggled with his handcuffs.

"He ain't a-goin'. He promise. You masta ain't a-goin' to whup you or nothin'. Don' be a-skeared," Mad assured Ace, drawing the key to the shackles from his pocket and unpinioning Ace's arms.

"Come along," Hammond ordered sternly. Seeing the runaway, his covert anger surged in him. He wished he had not pledged himself to a clemency which his feeling for the culprit did not inspire. "Come along," he repeated. He knew that if he said more he would burst out into abuse.

Ace flexed his arms and rose stiffly to his feet. "I afeared it git dark an' you not come. They boogers in them woods. I hearin' 'em, Masta Ham," Ace said.

"Day ain't done. Look at whure's the sun. You knowin' I ain't goin' to leave you here over night," Mad chided.

"Masta wouldn't. My masta wouldn't, Ace," Triumph assured his brother, grasping his arm with affection.

"I ride Too Sweet back," Madison arranged. "I don' want him carryin' double. You, Ace and Triumf, straddle Moonlight." He exchanged horses with the slave.

"Let him run alongside. The best thing. It will learn him. He cain't git away," Hammond suggested.

Madison faced Hammond squarely, his feet spread. "You said—," he began.

"I said I wouldn't hide him," Ham protested.

"You said you wouldn't hide it, nor nothin' else. You said you be good to

it. Are you a gent'man or ain't you? Do you keep your pledge or don' you?"

"Whut I done to him?" Hammond demanded defensively.

"It ain't whut you done, but whut you aimin'," rebutted Mad warily.

Ace cringed as Hammond stepped toward him, although his owner's only intention was to assess his condition. He spanned his shoulders, felt of his arms approvingly. "He growed," was his conclusion. "Must have et good. Tallened up too, seem like."

"I had a-carried him back sooner only fer my mamma. She wantin' to turn him to Emmaline. She reckon you wouldn't care," Madison explained.

"Hell, no!" said Hammond. "I lucky to git him back at all."

"Mamma done it. I never. I wouldn't my own se'f," Mad disclaimed.

"All right, an' you wants runners," said Hammond, mounting his horse.

"Emmaline bellyin' out, big-like," Mad said, his leg over Too Sweet. "Hopin' the sucker be a buck."

"Emmaline, she my wife now, Masta, suh," Ace proclaimed from behind Triumph on Moonlight. "Ain't she, Masta Mad, suh?"

"Your wife!" Hammond snorted. "She wife to a dozen ere ever you see her."

"She go to be yourn when my grampa die an' I buys you," Madison consoled the slave.

The cavalcade moved slowly across the open place, through the wood and back to the road. Madison was loath to tax Too Sweet with his own weight and Moonlight with the weight of the two brothers. Hammond rode ahead in an effort to set a more rapid pace, to which the Church thoroughbreds would gladly have adhered, but for their owner's care that they should not hasten. Once he halted, needlessly, Hammond chafed, to give Merry Legs a chance to nurse.

Arrived at the plantation, Hammond rode on directly to the field to see how the plowing had progressed in his absence, and Madison took Ace into the kitchen to insist that Lucretia Borgia should feed him the meal he had missed. Although grateful to Madison for the return of Ace, Hammond was contemptuous of his guest, somewhat resentful of the terms he imposed, and repelled by his care for Triumph's comfort over and beyond his welfare. Ace having eaten, Mad and his servant took their horses to the stables, where they wasted an hour with them, currying, rubbing, kissing, and admiring their symmetry and excellence.

"Be good," the owner admonished Too Sweet, as he gave the horse a final kiss. "Don't fret. Mad comin' back purty soon an' we goin' to eat supper." He had no doubt that the colt understood his words and reciprocated his affection.

Back in the sitting room where Blanche and Maxwell were drinking their toddies when Madison came in trailed by Triumph, the girl pouted, "You gone a long time, seem like. You all petered."

"Wasn't long. Had to ride slow, 'cause of Too Sweet is young," Madison explained.

"Seem long to me," Blanche smirked. "Meg, stir Mista Church a toddy. Cain't you see he petered? Rest you, an' take a swalla of mine while he stirrin' it," she said to Madison. She rose and held her goblet to his mouth and with her other hand caressed his hair.

Madison set his lips and refused to drink from her glass. He also ruffled his hair again where the girl had smoothed it.

Seeing the boy's reaction, Maxwell shook his head at Blanche. "Mustn't never do like that," he admonished her. "He shy-like an' plagued."

Madison was neither so shy nor so embarrassed as he was distressed by the woman's contact, which to him was not only unseemly but distasteful. He shrank from it.

Meg brought the toddy, which Madison alternately sipped and shared with Triumph who sat on the floor beside his chair.

"Kin I go out, Masta, suh, an' play with Ace?" the boy summoned courage to ask, rising to his knees.

"Whut you reckon I got you fer, 'ceptin' I wants you, my own se'f?" the master denied the request. "You stay still an' nice whure you at. Besides, Ace is tired." Madison embraced the boy's shoulder and tenderly pulled his head down to rest on his thighs.

"He workin' already, I reckon," said Maxwell. "Hammon' short of hands." He carved a chew of tobacco and offered the twist to his guest, who declined it.

"You don' reckon he workin' it because it run?" Madison was apprehensive.

Maxwell chuckled. "He goin' to work him down some, work the runnin' out of him, I guess. Won' hurt him none. Not a-goin' to lash him or starve him. Hammon' done tol' you. Ain't that enough?"

"He pledge he won' do nothin' to it."

"Then he won', you kin lay to it. Hammond's word good. Though you cain't 'spect him to tote a runner aroun' on a feather pillow—like you do yourn."

"Mista Church do not neither, Grampa, tote hisn on a pillow," Blanche came to Mad's defense. "He on'y jest like to have it by, if he goin' to want somepin'. Don' you, Mista Church?"

CHAPTER 45

MADISON could hardly leave the evening of the day he arrived. Hammond had assumed that he would spend the night at Falconhurst, but he surmised that he would set out the following day. Hammond came in exhausted from his day's labor. He had been twelve hours in the saddle. A single toddy after supper and he was ready for bed. He knew Madison's distaste for females and showed him to his room without the offer of a wench for his bed.

In the morning he heard Madison stirring at dawn and found him with his minion in the barn cleaning the stables in which his horses had slept. He assumed that the guest was preparing for an early departure.

"You hadn't ought to do that. It niggers' work. They fork it out, come time they git aroun'," Hammond admonished Mad.

"Naw, suh," said the other. "Naw, suh. Too Sweet don' crave no strange nigger cleanin' him. He kick out somepin' awful. But he don' like his stall dirty an' stinkin' neither."

Madison and Triumph went forward with their chore, and Hammond knew by the manner in which they spread fresh straw for their horses that departure was not in their plans. He did not resent the extension of their stay, although it came at a time when he was busy in the field and he doubted Mad's pleasure in merely sitting to drink toddies with his father. Perhaps, it struck him, Mad was prolonging his visit merely to see to it that Ace should not be punished and that did pique him. He would keep his promise, of course. He would forgive Ace for running, but he had no intention of pampering him or of relieving him from his share of labor.

After breakfast, when Hammond set out for the barn to get his horse, Madison and Triumph went along. Without invitation, they mounted their own horses, the master up on the mare and the slave on the colt, and rode along with him to the field. A dozen plows were turning the topsoil, spread out over a vast area, each hand with a separate stint assigned to him. Hammond sat his horse and watched his slaves, rode from one plot to another, giving advice, watching to see that the rows were straight, that no ground between them was missed, that the shares struck deep, and that the mules should not be abused. His supervision was required, although his mere presence was enough to keep the slaves at their labor and he had little to do. Small boys circulated among the workmen with buckets of water, scooped from the river or drawn from the well, whichever was nearest. They, too, had little to do and spent most of their time lying on the ground waiting to be summoned by some thirsty plowman.

Madison on Moonlight, followed by Triumph on Too Sweet, rode from plot to plot, watching the Negroes plodding behind their respective mules and

offering no comment. At length, Mad dismounted and, throwing Moonlight's bridle to his lackey, waited at the end of a furrow for the plowman to arrive.

"Take here, an' res' yourse'f," he told the sturdy yellow boy and, pushing him out of his way, grasped the handles of the plow. "Gee up there," he called to the mule and moved off in the plow's wake.

The yellow boy, assuming some error in his method of plowing, followed Madison along the furrow, trying to see what the white man was demonstrating and ready to resume his task when the white man should give it over. He trudged behind Madison the length of the furrow and back again, when the white man turned upon him and said, "Res' yourse'f, I tellin' you. Lay you down in them weeds an res'. I doin' it. I plowin' fer you."

The discomfited boy did as he was bidden, confused by the white man's strange behavior. Gentlemen did not assume Negroes' tasks just to relieve them from labor. The boy was not tired; his day had just begun. He was ill at ease, lying on the ground with a white man doing his work.

Hammond, two hundred yards away, saw Madison following a plow and galloped across to the furrow's end. "Whut this?" he demanded from the resting plowhand. "Whut fer the white gen'leman plowin'? You sick or somethin'?"

"Naw, suh, Masta, suh," the boy shrugged. "The gen'man say—say I got to res' an' took my mule."

Hammond sat his horse and waited for Mad's return. "Whut fer you plowin'?" he asked. "Did this nigger ast you?"

"He tire, walkin' behin' that mule all day. He tire. Anybody see he tire'. I plowin' fer him," Madison explained.

"Ain't he plowin' good?" Hammond asked.

"He plow all right. No better than I kin, though. Ain't I plow straight an' deep?"

Hammond admitted the virtues of Mad's furrow. "No call you should do it, though. Ruinin' my niggers."

Madison grinned over his shoulder at his host, as he moved off to make another round of the field. The Negro still lay in the weeds, easier now that his owner had not upbraided him for his idleness. Hammond moved away, shaking his head, mystified by the vagaries of his erratic guest.

Madison continued his plowing in that field for more than half an hour, after which he surrendered his mule to the rested slave, mounted his mare, and moved on to where Ace was plowing. Again he threw his bridle to Triumph and, when Ace returned, took over his plowing. Ace was unperturbed by the relief; he was used to Mad's assumption of menial tasks for the pleasure it gave him to perform them. Madison Church was perhaps the laziest white man alive, or, if not the laziest, then the most reluctant to undertake imposed labor. He would have nobody telling him what to do, but voluntary effort, when the spirit moved him to it, gave him joy. This plowing

was play. Besides, he had compassion for them who were forced to work—even for Negroes and mules.

He continued plodding up and down behind Ace's plow until Hammond appeared again and waited for him to come up. "Give that mustee nigger back his mule," Hammond was peremptory. "I ain't aimin' that one goin' to slack. I aimin' he goin' to work, work that runnin' outn him."

"You promise you wouldn't do nothin'," Madison pouted.

"I didn't promise I not goin' to work him. Goin' to work the runnin' outn him. Give him that mule, I tellin' you." Hammond was angry.

"I goin' to cry," Madison threatened.

"Cry all you wants," said Hammond. "Give him that mule." This was no way for one white man to address another, much less a host to a guest, and Hammond Maxwell knew it. By way of amends, he added, "Plow fer them other hands, you wants to; plow all you craves. But this mustee, he goin' to work."

Madison did not cry. He turned the plow back to Ace, remounted his mare and moved away, convinced more than ever that it was Hammond's intent in some fashion to penalize Ace for his absence. He moved on to relieve Mede, but Hammond came up just as Mede was comfortably stretched in the sunshine to suggest that, if Mede were not going to plow, he should resume his training activities. He called Willie, the nearest water boy, and, putting him astride Mede's shoulders, commanded the Mandingo to run with him in a wide circle. Running with such a burden on his back was more exhausting than plowing, especially when he had no apparent purpose or destination. Black Willie relished his mastery more than he enjoyed the jolting and kicked the ribs of his human steed with his bare heels to make him run the faster until Mede, tiring of the blows, grasped and held the boy's feet.

Madison sensed a kind of malice in Hammond's assigning to the slave a more jading task than the one from which he had been relieved, but, if there was, Hammond was unaware of his motive. He believed only that Mede should spend his waking hours in some kind of violent activity that should season and harden his sinews against the time he should find another fight for him.

The sun reached its zenith and the boys began bringing the slaves their dinners. Hammond came back and summoned Madison to the house. Mad returned the mule to its driver and went with his host. Before he would go to the house, however, he insisted upon stopping at the stable to feed his horses. While he was about it, moreover, he also fed Eclipse, which Hammond had left for the attention of a hostler.

Blanche sat primly in the sitting room, rocking in amiable conversation with her father-in-law. Her hair was neatly combed and she was tightly laced into the second of her costumes, with which she sought to impress the visitor but of which he failed to take any cognizance. Hammond commanded Meg to

bring toddies, and as Blanche drank hers, she fanned herself and, looking as coquettishly as she was able at Madison, contributed the remark, "Warm, suh; ain't it?"

Mad left the reply to whoever might wish to make it.

"Madison real tired, I reckon," said Hammond. "He been a-plowin', plowin' his own se'f."

"Plowin'? White man plowin'?" asked Maxwell in amazement. "A nigger git sick?"

"No, niggers good. I 'on't know why he done it," Hammond shrugged. "He jest wanted."

"I likes to see it turn over," was all Mad's explanation. "Besides, it res' the niggers."

"Mista Church, he right kin' to niggers," Blanche smirked. "Ain't you, Mista Church?" to which Mad gave no answer, indifferent to female praise.

After dinner, the younger men returned to the field, and Madison relieved another slave from his task at tillage. The sun beat down upon the field and Mad returned the plow to the slave.

At Hammond's passing, Mad interrupted him. "Kin I swim my Triumf in your river? It startin' in to stink?"

"Ol' Tombigbee ain't my river. It anybody's river," Hammond replied. "Swim him an' you wants. Better watch out fer moccasins this time of year though."

Mad lifted his boy down from his horse, and tethered it and his own to alders in the shade by the water's edge. He took Triumph's brass buttoned jacket from his back and forced the boy to lie while he stripped off his tight breeches. The child stood naked in the sun. Mad picked up a crooked stick and, going to the shoreline, flung it as far as he was able into the water, ordering the boy, "Fetch!"

The young slave looked at the owner blankly, and Mad repeated, "Fetch, I tellin' you!"

The boy stood by the water, hesitatingly immersed one foot, and the master grasped him by the neck with one hand, ran the other between his legs and pitched him headlong into the stream. The boy came up, surprised and sputtering. "Fetch, I says!" Mad reiterated.

After the first shock of it, the water was pleasant, and Triumph set out paddling dog-fashion to retrieve the stick. He overtook it as it floated downstream, paddling back, came to the bank to lay the stick at his master's feet.

"That good," Mad commended, "only you slow. This time be quick," and he flung the stick again. "Go, fetch!" he commanded.

The boy obeyed and brought the stick as quickly as he was able. Madison enjoyed seeing Triumph struggle in the water, and he threw the stick again and again.

At length Triumph emerged from the water breathless and exhausted. He

placed the stick at Mad's feet and sprawled beside it. "I tired, Masta, suh, please, suh," he said.

"You isn't tired," the master contradicted. "You only playin' off. Once agin. Go fetch!" and he flung the stick far out.

"Please, suh," the youth pleaded, rising to his feet.

"Go fetch, I sayin'!" said Mad.

The boy obeyed and plunged, but his stroke was weak. Mad saw and called to him to come back but Triumph failed to hear. The water was muddy, and Mad saw only the head a-bob. Then failed to see the head. For a long minute he failed to see the head. What should he do? He called as loud as he was able, and then in his long coat he plunged to the rescue. Impeded by his clothes, he swam slowly, but he could go no faster. In the muddy stream he could not see the boy at all, but knew that he was going toward the floating stick. The farther he swam from the bank the clearer the water became and after a time interminable to him, he sighted the young slave. With a spurt of effort of which he had not thought himself capable, and with a pounding heart, he overtook the boy, who slumped, a dead weight in his arms, a dead weight of naked flesh.

Mad trembled, whether with exhaustion or emotion he knew not. The water suddenly was cold. Should he relinquish the dead boy, let the poor dead thing that had so recently been playing at his feet float onward to the gulf? He could not give him up, so animated, so alive, so active, so good he had been, and now so flaccid. Mad had no doubts about his being able to swim back to shore, even impeded as he was with his boots and long coat. But with this now useless corpse? He couldn't surrender it to the current and resolved to take the boy with him. He slung the body over his left shoulder and grasped the leg with one hand, swimming with the other. He moved slowly.

Hammond had heard him call and was now on the bank. The plowmen, too, had heard and had paused where they were.

Mad moved slowly against the current. How he regretted that final cast of the stick. The boy had said he was tired, had begged. He, Mad, had made but one trip and he was exhausted, but he was trammeled by his coat and the weight on his shoulders. Slowly, exhaustedly, he reached the shallows and waded ashore, casting the body on the ground.

Hammond had dismounted and turned Eclipse loose. "Upturn him, an' dreen his lights," Hammond called.

"No use. It dead a'ready," Madison panted, shivering in the sun. He burst into tears, gathered the body in his arms, holding it tight and kissing it, mouth, and forehead, and limbs and belly, as if trying to kiss life back into what was dead.

"Up-end him," Hammond said again, grasping the boy by the ankles and swinging him, head down. Water ran from the lungs. Hammond continued to hold him, until nothing more came away. The lungs were empty. He laid the body supine in the weeds, and, brushing the mud from it, sensed rather

than felt the beat of the heart. His hand hovered over the left nipple, and this time felt the faint pounding of the pulse.

"This nigger ain't dead," he said. "His heart a-jumpin', jumpin' harder, jumpin' right smart."

Mad knelt and placed his hand where Ham's had been. It was true. The boy was alive. Mad clasped the body to him, and blubbered for joy.

"Put down, put down," urged Hammond excitedly. "Let the bastard puff, an' it wants to."

But Triumph opened his eyes and finding himself in his master's arms, he smiled. Slowly he regained consciousness, and Hammond, calling Mede to chase and bring his horse, remounted.

"It swim good. You had ought to see it fetch that stick," Mad said to Hammond. "Mayhap, I goin' to swim it agin come tomorrow. You see then how good it swim. Won't he, Triumf?"

"Yas, suh, Masta, suh," the boy was able to whisper.

Madison shivered in his wet garments. He removed the coat, wrung as much of the water from it as he was able and put it on again. The boy remained inert, but the master carried him to the river-side and washed the mud from him, squeezed the water from his body and legs and drew over the still damp skin the blue pants and jacket.

"Kin I loan Ace offn you a little spell?" he called to Hammond. "I craves he goin' to carry these hosses of mine to barn 'em. I goin' to tote the othern to the house my own se'f."

Hammond told Ace to leave his plow in the furrow, and when the boy arrived, Madison explained the circumstances to Moonlight and Too Sweet. "You all knowin' Ace. You ain't a-goin' to kick out at it. Goin' to be good an' let Mad tote Triumf in. Ain't you? Triumf sick-like. It near to drowned."

Ace was glad not only of relief from his labors but for an opportunity to ride the young stallion. However, when he untied him and moved to mount, the white man stopped him. "Lead him. Don' ride him. You too heavy on him," he directed.

"You ridin' him yestiday, Masta, suh," Ace said. "You bigger'n me."

"Nev' min'. I say lead him," Mad answered.

He knelt and cradled Triumph in his arms and struggled to his feet with his burden. Ace walked ahead, leading the two horses, Merry Legs tagging behind her mother. The boy in Madison's arms slowed him, but he continued to shout assurance to the stallion, who followed the slave without rebellion. Madison saw his horses safely in their stalls, and promised them that he would come later and feed them, before he went on to the house with the boy in his arms.

"Whut fer you tote him? He kin walk his own se'f, cain't he?" scoffed Maxwell before he had heard the story of the accident. "You all wettin'; better have a toddy to dry you out."

Mad seated himself in a low chair, shifted Triumph's position so that he

could gaze into his face, and rocked him fondly, as if the boy had been a sick baby. When Meg brought the toddy, Madison slurped a single swallow to test its temperature, after which he held the goblet to the mouth of his slave, who permitted the sweet mixture to trickle down his throat. Though he found the taste unpleasant, he enjoyed the solicitous attention with which his master urged him to drink it. With the first toddy, the boy brightened and struggled to escape from Mad's lap, but after the third, unused to alcohol, he developed a slight nausea in which he fell asleep, drunk in the white man's arms. In the belief that the boy had had a relapse, Mad's anxiety grew.

"Put him down. He ain't only drunken," Maxwell diagnosed.

"I'll take him up," Mad whispered. " 'Haps he wake up better." He carried the child up the stairs, undressed him and placed him in bed without the boy's waking. He knew by Triumph's breathing that he was not yet dead, but, as he sat with the boy's hand in his own, he dreaded that he might die. At length, Triumph began to mumble, restoring Mad's confidence that he would live.

The shadows began to fall, and Mad had to leave his patient to go to feed his horses. He hurried through the process, bringing them water from the well, mixing the oats, and spreading a thick bed of straw. As he worked, he talked to the horses, explaining to them, "Triumf, it sick. That why it ain't come to fix Too Sweet. Mad got to do it. Don' fret, Too Sweet. Triumf will come, come mornin'. It ain't goin' to die. It goin' to git well. Don't you fret." In his haste to return to his young slave, he omitted the brushing of the horses, which was a part of his usual evening ritual.

When Hammond came in from the field and missed Madison, he asked his father about Triumph. "Somethin' close," he said. "Ifn I hadn't of come and shaked the water out of his lights jest in the nick, he goin' to die sure."

"Whut fer that Mista Church so loony aboutn that little saplin' buck?" Blanche wanted to know. "Ain't only a little nigger," she said.

"He five hunert dollars worth of little nigger. That how much he pay us fer him. Don' you remember?" said the husband.

"Mad ain't rich. He ain't got so many niggers he got to kick 'em outn his path before he kin step," suggested Maxwell. "He gotten to take care of whut he got."

"He go to be rich when his grampa die," declared Blanche. "He say so his own se'f."

"Mayhap, he ain't got no grampa. I don' know," said Hammond.

"Leastwise, he don' got to hol' that Triumf, an' rock him, an' all," Blanche scoffed.

"Most as loony 'bout them hosses, only they fine. They blood stock," said Hammond.

"They different," said Blanche.

Hammond went up the stairs as much to see for himself how the mustee did as to summon Madison to supper. He found the young man sitting on

the side of the bed, the sleeping slave hugged in his arms, his legs dangling.

"Put him down an' stop your frettin'. He goin' to be good as new," Hammond argued. "An' come along down to supper."

Madison laid the unwaking boy on the bed and went with his host, but he could eat no supper. At Maxwell's insistent invitation, he hurriedly swallowed a toddy afterwards, but was impatient to return to the boy.

Blanche, too, after she had drunk three toddies and after Hammond had forbidden her to drink more, went to bed. The Maxwells, father and son, sat in the twilight.

"You ain't doin' your duty, Son," said the older man, at length.

"Ain't? How ain't I doin' ever'thin'?"

"Blanche. I meanin'. She gittin' res'less-like, dressin' all up an' primpin' fer that Madison. I see her rollin' her eyes his way all a time," said Maxwell. "An' if she goin' to have that boy—"

"I'll kill him. I'll drive him offn the place," Hammond threatened. "Whyn't you tell me? If that bumpkin come aroun' cravin' my wife, I—"

"I am a-tellin' you now. Only it ain't him. He don' do nothin'. Don' even let on as how he sees her. Don' believe he do, in fac'."

"It's her then," breathed Hammond.

"Dressin' up fine an' actin' stylish. Jes' fer him. This mornin' there was rice on her face, like she had washed it in a flour barrel."

"I never reckon she that kin'. Whut I goin' to do? Sen' Mad off? Wished he'd go his own se'f; but, him a-bringin' the mustee back, cain't hardly sen' him along. 'Specially when you say he ain't done nothin'." Hammond was perplexed.

"You ain't done nothin' neither," accused the father. "You wantin' you a son. How you reckon you goin' to have one, skylarkin' an' pleasurin' with your nigger ever' night, an' lettin' your wife res' alone?"

"You say, your own se'f, a white lady don' relish pesterin'. Ellen jest a-savin' Blanche. You say it all right, me a-havin' Ellen. I don't care an' if it ain't."

"All right, it all right, a-havin' her. Yes. That all right. On'y it not all right to be loony over her. You makin' light of Mad Church an' his mustee. You jest as bad, your own se'f, about your yaller wench. You got sometimes to sleep along with your woman. 'Specially you cravin' another chil'. I ain't preachin' at you. Ain't interferin'. Not a whit," Maxwell exhausted his diatribe. "Only I reckon you had ought to know. That why Blanche ricin' her face. That why she drinkin' corn, so much of it. That why she rollin' her eyes at ever' gen'leman that happens along. Ain't nothin' exactly wrong, I reckon."

Hammond did not betray his intention to his father, but he was the last to bed and went to his wife's room. When he failed to come to his own bed, Ellen, feeling herself displaced and abandoned, as she had long believed was

inevitable, cried herself to sleep. That it should come so soon! She knew that she was but a Negro, a slave, a bauble, to be cast aside upon a whim, no match for a white woman to whom her master happened to be married, a woman with a white skin and fancy clothes to cover it.

Triumph had regained much of his strength by morning. He was able to follow his master when he went to the barn to care for his horses, but he could not help him with the task. Madison was jubilant with the boy's recovery, and, while he worked over Too Sweet, recounted to the horse exactly what had occurred and reassured him that Triumph would curry him the following day. They did not go to the field that day, but returned to the house that Triumph might rest. Mad took the boy in his arms and rocked him as if he had been a baby. He carried in his pocket lemon drops, which he plopped one by one into the boy's mouth. He fed him from his fork at table. He held his toddy glass for the boy to drink from, after which he wiped the boy's mouth on his dirty handkerchief. As the boy fell asleep with his cheek against Mad's shoulder, the master would wake him up to ask him how he felt. This twenty-four hour a day attachment to his master's person did not appear to irk Triumph, although it made him infantile and dependent, which was as Madison desired it. Madison mothered him. Triumph was an extension of Madison's body, governed by Madison's brain, two extra hands, two extra feet. Madison considered his treatment of the boy as kindness, and the boy did not know that it was not.

Laced tightly in her third dress, which was now too small for her enlarged body, Blanche was all affability. Now that Hammond had returned to her, it mattered less that Mad ignored her. She had not quite given up hope, however, and believed that her dress and manners might yet prove irresistible. What vexed her most was that a Negro boy should be her rival.

"I don' see whut fer, Mista Church, you so choice of that nigger buck," she blurted. "He soon goin' to be big enough to sell off, I reckon, but I cain't see he stout an' likely 'nough to bring much."

"Triumf?" Mad asked, adjusting the boy's head on his shoulder. "Triumf? I ain't never goin' to sell it. I always goin' to keep it. Ain't I Triumf?"

The boy ducked his head in assent.

In the evening, after supper, when Hammond invaded Lucretia Borgia's kitchen, he found the room crowded, Ellen and Dite washing and drying dishes, the twins eating, Mad hovering over Triumph and urging him to eat, Memnon piling wood into the fireplace, Big Pearl sucking Sophia and Old Mister Wilson, Lucretia Borgia's child asleep in a basket. Lucretia Borgia had no reticence, but her laughing lack of concern was an effectation.

"Ellen, here, wonderin' whure she goin' to sleep. She tellin' me I should ax you, Masta, suh. She skeared to," Lucretia Borgia chuckled aloud.

Ellen was tense for the answer.

"Goin' to sleep?" Hammond repeated. "Why, she goin' to sleep whure

she always sleep, in my bed. I ain't tellin' her she cain't."

"She reckonin' mayhap—You not a-wantin'—you not a-comin' las' night—," Lucretia Borgia was not sure how she wished to put the matter.

"Lesten she ruther not," Hammond added. "Ellen thinkin'—because I—las' night?"

"She ain't a-knowin' suh, Masta, suh," Lucretia Borgia said.

Hammond walked to the table where Ellen stood above the dishpan and encircled the girl with his arm. "That, like las' night, is jest sometimes. You mine tonight and here-on," he told her. "Don' you fret. Don' you ever fret, Ellen. You mine, you knows, you mine."

With this reassurance, this removal of her doubts, the girl's eyes filled with tears and she buried her face in her master's coat, weeping her satisfaction.

"I tol' her. I tol' her nev' min'," Lucretia Borgia muttered.

"I come tonight, sure will," Hammond promised.

Blanche waited that night for her husband's arrival. At length, when he failed to come, she arose and tiptoed into the hall where she saw Meg asleep before his master's door. She returned to her room, threw herself upon her bed, and cried herself to sleep. She knew then that Hammond had chosen.

And Madison was indifferent to her charms. When she arose in the morning, she took her earrings from the drawer of her commode and fastened them into her ears. They were pretty, she knew, but she could not bring herself to wear them, and took them off again. She would not be marked as one of Hammond's special chattels by wearing them, whatever enticement they might have for Madison Church. She remembered that Madison had seen her in the challis dress after her wedding, but she had already worn the other three dresses for him without response. She got out the challis and put it on, but, when Tense tried to fasten it, it was apparent that she had grown out of it. It would not come together; it could not be buttoned. She took off the dress and had nothing left to show the guest.

And what did it matter anyway? Madison's sole interests were his boy and his horses; he was immune to female blandishments. Blanche's attempts at flirtation with him were innocent—or so she thought. Mad, he said, would someday be rich, but she had no further serious designs than to excite Hammond's jealousy and ire, which she had failed to do. It was useless. Madison was not interested in her. Why should she try?

Madison had become one of the family, in any event. Why should she continue her pretense of elegance? A clean Mother Hubbard wrapper was all that was required and was more comfortable than one of her formal dresses. She would wear her shoes and stockings, of course, and comb her hair. The days were getting warm.

Madison was as unmindful of Blanche in blue calico as in silk. Instead of remaining in the house for gossip and toddies, as Blanche wished, he went with Hammond to the fields, taking with him the now restored Triumph.

"That Mista Church," Blanche observed to her father-in-law, "he ain't human, seem like."

Maxwell chuckled. "He ain't no harm," he said. "He jest waitin' to see that Ham ain't a-goin' to lambaste that mustee runner. I don' see how we ever goin' to git us shet of him."

"You an' me, he don' know we here, seem like. Ain't interes'ed in nothin', save that little yaller buck. An', of course, Hammon'," Blanche added. "He dead set on Hammon'."

"Course, he kin stay long as he like, a white gent'man. On'y Ham don' need no watchin'. He keep his pledge to not flog that Ace," Maxwell said.

He had misjudged Madison's motive, which was not to see to it that Ace was not whipped. The return of Ace was merely an excuse to pay a visit to his friend, which he had long projected and which he was enjoying. He went to the fields to be with his host and only incidentally to plow, and he plowed only as much as gave him pleasure. When he took a slave's plow and mule away from him and trudged a furrow, followed by Triumph, he did not count it either as labor for himself or as respite for the slave. Since he received no recompense for what he did, no ethnic dignity was at stake. Triumph's sole duty was to remain within reach of his master's arm.

Madison's stay at Falconhurst had prolonged itself into the third week and no end of it was in sight. Blanche had given up all thoughts of conquest, although she still liked the boy; and the Maxwells were reconciled to having him as a permanent guest. His presence offered no inconvenience, and to consider the cost of the keep of a guest would have violated hospitality.

However, in mid-week, Hammond upon his return from the field for dinner, Madison and Triumph with him, saw a Negro asleep under the tupelo tree before the house. A gaunt mule, unsaddled, its bridle thrown forward over its head, browsed beside the lane to the road.

"Ain't no nigger of ourn," Hammond commented to Mad. "Wonder whure from he come." He went forward and with his foot rocked the man awake. "Whose nigger is you?" Hammond demanded.

The Negro sat upright. "I Masta Mad Church's nigger," he muttered, rubbing his eyes. "He here, please, suh, Masta?"

"It Luke," cried Madison, recognizing his slave and rushing forward to embrace him. "Luke! Whure you come from, boy?"

"Masta Mad, Masta Mad, suh," the Negro brightened. "Mist'ess done sen' me, suh. She say tell you come home. We movin' away, movin' North. She say come home, suh, please, suh."

"North?" Madison asked, baffled.

"Yas, suh, Masta. Your gran'pa done die, your mamma say, an' us movin' North."

Madison choked. Tears, involuntary tears, came into his eyes, and he shuddered into weeping. Triumph, seeing his master weep, wept too; he knew not

why. Hammond took Mad's arm and led him to the edge of the gallery where he sat down to vent his grief. He reached out and pulled Triumph down beside him, and they wept together.

"Pore Grampa! Pore Grampa!" moaned Madison, convulsed.

"Don' cry, Mad," Hammond begged. "He gittin' ol' a'ready. You knowed he goin' to die. You jest a-waitin'."

"I know. I know. Pore Grampa!" Madison sobbed.

Hammond thought that he should say something and asked, "How long sence you seen him, your grampa?"

"I ain't never see him," Madison shook his head. "On'y he dead! He dead! He burnin'. He in hell. The way he served my mamma!" Mad wiped his eyes with his soiled handkerchief, smiled at Hammond, and convulsed again into tears.

Hammond stood over him and let him weep until he had no more tears. Then he raised him to his feet and led him into the house, sobbing dryly. Blanche, when she had heard the news, put down her goblet and wept with the desolated boy. She didn't know why she wept. Triumph kissed his master's tear-streaked cheeks, pulled down his hands with which Mad covered his face, and begged him not to grieve.

Whether in response to the slave's plea or because the rills had run dry, Mad's whimpering ceased as suddenly as it had begun.

"I rich now," he smiled. The concept had just struck him. "I rich, an' I kin buy Ace offn you, soon as I gits my money an' all." His grief had given way to his satisfaction. "You goin' to keep it fer me? You won' sell it off or whup it or nothin'?"

Hammond promised.

"You got to come, Ham, suh, an' see me, see my fine niggers an' mules an' house an' lan' an' all."

Hammond said idly that he would.

"I got to go an' git it, I reckon. Cain't stay an' visit no longer." Regret at parting was in Mad's voice. "On'y I comin' back. I comin' back, ain't we, Triumf? Too Sweet grow up big by that time."

Throughout dinner Mad talked of the fortune to which he, or rather his mother, was the heir. He had no idea of its size and little of its nature except that it was a large plantation with slaves and mules. His greatest satisfaction with it was that it would enable him to buy Ace as a present for Triumph. There was little else he wanted that he didn't already have. His grief for his grandfather was forgotten.

Immediately after dinner, Hammond accompanied his guest to the barn to saddle his horses. Triumph, never out of reach of his master's arm, went along.

"Ain't no good pressin' me, I got to go," Mad assured Hammond, who had in fact interposed no barrier to his departure. "But don' you fret. I comin' back, soon as we settle, an' finish out my visit. Jes' like Grampa, jest like him,

to up an' die an' break up my visit. I comin' back, don' you fret, suh."

So far from fretting, Hammond was relieved to be rid of the guest. His only anxiety was in the delay, since he wanted to return to the field and hospitality demanded that he tarry for farewells.

The elder Maxwell and Blanche came to the gallery to see the departure. Mad dismounted from Moonlight, made a courtly bow to his hostess, shook the old man's hand warmly but without emotion. At last he turned to Hammond, grasped and held his hand, and looked into his face. His eyes swam in tears. He relinquished Hammond's hand and embraced his body, burying his convulsed face in Hammond's coat. He sighed and sobbed and blubbered until the embarrassed Hammond disengaged himself and pushed Mad from him.

"I don' care, I don' care, I don' care. I ruther stay with you than have all the plantations an' niggers in the whole world. I wouldn't care was I a nigger my own se'f, an' if I could be yourn an' work fer you. You my frien', my bes' frien'," Mad protested.

Hammond had no answer for Mad's protestations, and so he merely patted his shoulder. Mad, visibly resolute, swung himself into the saddle, beckoned to the already mounted Triumph, and, looking backward, put Moonlight in motion. Merry Legs followed her dam. Luke on his mule brought up the rear, aware that he was to be outdistanced by the horses and would be forced to make his way alone.

Mad turned and called behind him, "Don' sell that Ace; I a-wantin' it fer Triumf. I goin' to come back an' buy it. An' don' whup it. Remember you promised."

Hammond raised his arm in a final gesture of farewell. Then he brushed his hands together as if seeking to cleanse them, muttering under his breath, "Fool!"

"Reckon he had a grampa, afta all," commented Maxwell, turning to enter the house.

"I tellin' you all," said Blanche. "I tellin' you."

CHAPTER 46

IT was a wet and windy spring. Many of the cotton seeds rotted and failed to germinate; large areas in the lowest ground had to be replanted. The plants that broke through the soil were yellow and unthrifty, but the weather did not deter the weeds and the ground was too wet to hoe. Hammond was displeased with the prospects for his cotton crop.

"Cotton? Whut's cotton?" chuckled the elder Maxwell to relieve his son's anxiety. "It's the nigger crop whut pays." It was his conviction, but he uttered it for its effect upon the boy.

The hoe-gang was made up of only the most trustworthy and experienced of the hands, lest the less careful might chop the young cotton plants along with the weeds. The sogginess of the soil delayed the weeding, and on days following a spell of sunshine and wind the gang worked from the time its members could see in the morning until it was too dark to see at night. Nor did Hammond spare himself. He was first out and last in, riding between the cotton rows, admonishing the Negroes to thoroughness, cautioning them to care.

On days when it was impossible to hoe in the fields, the slaves were permitted to idle, to work if they could in their own patches of garden, or just to sit and doze or converse and laugh at each other's antics or sallies of such wit as they had—all but Mede. When there was no work for Mede, he was exercised. Hammond forced him to run in a large circle with a younger slave astride his shoulders, to jump and leap, to lift logs, to flex and twist his body, to wrestle with two less powerful slaves at the same time. The owner found surcease from his anxiety about his cotton in watching the Mandingo labor and contort his body, and the slave never appeared to tire. Mede, magnificent as he had been when his master had acquired him, had matured, broadened, and filled out during his year at Falconhurst, until he was now more handsome and formidable than ever. Hammond never tired of watching his development as he approached the zenith of his physical perfection and barbaric beauty. The owner's regret was that there was no buck in the neighborhood worthy to match against him, and even that regret was mitigated by the confidence that Mede would not be marred if he did not fight. The boy's invincibility, the master did not question, but he was not so sure that some chance mishap might not maim or cripple the slave, lessening his value by more than might be won from a victorious fight. The bout with Topaz had taught Hammond what hazards lurked even in victory.

Hammond desired as many progeny from the boy as he could obtain, and from time to time delegated women to be his mates. Offered to Mede as rewards for his devotion to training, their number was limited, however, by Hammond's fear that sexual use might deplete Mede's strength. The matings

were supervised like those of other animals, as if the Mandingo had been a stallion or a bull. The girls sometimes made a giggling or pouting remonstrance to their master's presence, but Hammond was stern and Mede was unabashed. The docile slave thought of this surveillance as a master's right, if not his duty, to control his every act. What he resented was Hammond's insistence that he swallow a pitcher of raw eggs to restore his vigor after his exertions. Hammond had from his father a belief that babies born in the spring were stronger than those born in other seasons and he saw to it that as many of the women as possible should conceive in the early summer. Mede accepted his function in this program with acquiescence but with no show of enthusiasm.

Many of the cotton seeds that were believed to have perished finally came up and the resown areas had to be thinned. The yellow leaves of the cotton turned green under the sunshine, although the sickly plants never turned vigorous. Hammond's discouragement abated in the belief that his efforts had not all been wasted, that the crop would warrant chopping, and even if it did not, it would provide activity for the slaves, who, if no work were assigned to them, would grow demoralized and vicious. He knew that he could not ask the exhausted soil of Falconhurst for a bountiful yield.

Hammond timed his trips to Benson to enable him to look in on the fights at Pearl's, despite that his interest was desultory when he had no participant in the contests. He drank with the sporting men and laid small bets upon the fights without much caring whether he should win or lose. His prime purpose in attending was to remind the others of Mede's prowess, which he did with understatement and mild disparagement, lest it seem that he was boasting.

"How your big buck come on, Ham?" somebody was certain to ask.

"Whuch one?" he would reply.

"You knowin' whuch one I mean. That gyascutus of yourn."

"Oh, you meanin' Mede. He all right, I reckon. Off his feed a little. I been studdin' him right smart. Takes him down."

"Cain't fin' no buck to pit him agin', got to pit him agin' wenches, eh?" Alcorn guffawed and the men echoed the laughter.

"I'd sure admire to watch him hump," said Alonzo Kyle. "Edifyin', I'd say it mus' be."

"Jes' like any other buck, any stout one," Hammond declared. "Got to watch out though he don' tear 'em, bust 'em right open."

"I bet you do, the way he hung," commented Lewis Gasaway. "He sure tooled, tooled up like a jackass."

Hammond's wont was to go every week to the Post Office, a cubbyhole partitioned from the back part of the grocery store, to obtain the *New Orleans Advertiser,* to which his father was a subscriber. There was seldom any other mail for him. However, early in June he found a letter addressed to himself.

"H Maxwell, eskuir." Hastily he tore it from its wrapper. It turned out to be a broadside, an advertisement of an auction. "AUCTION, AUCTION," it read in bold type. "NEGROES, MULES, HORSES, PLOUGHS, WAGONS. SATURDAY, JULY 7 AT THE COURTHOUSE BLOCK AT WAYNESBORO." In smaller type followed: "Vended at public outcry to the highest bidder, without any reserve, for cash, will be 32 NEGROES, 32, all sound and likely, men, women, boys, girls, 11 young mules, yearlings and older, 3 mares, all good breeders, assortment of ploughs, wagons, buggies, etc., etc., from the estate of the late deceased EDWARD ALLEN. The heirs must have money to settle debts, etc. This is a public opportunity to secure prime stock at your own price. Never anything like it. Come one, come all." (Signed) "A. C. Murry, Auctioneer." Awkwardly scrawled so lightly in pencil following "Edward Allen" that Hammond almost failed to see it was "This is grampa."

Hammond had no idea as to where Waynesboro might be or whom the message might have come from. He was the only H. Maxwell in or around Benson and he knew it was intended for him. He folded the broadside carefully, returned it to its wrapper and placed it in his pocket to show to his father. The receipt of mail other than the newspaper was so uncommon that any piece of it was always considered and digested. Hammond was half way home when it suddenly struck him that this message was from Madison Church. He smiled to consider the fatuous vanity that prompted Mad to send it so far. Waynesboro must be up in Tennessee, he surmised, and Mad wanted the Maxwells to know that he was Allen's grandson.

"Look whut come in the post office," he told his father, withdrawing the document from his pocket. "Look; it say it his grampa. Come from Mad, you reckon?"

Maxwell read the advertisement carefully, turned it over and read on its back a penciled message that Hammond had failed to see. "You goin'?" he asked.

"No! Away out there, Waynesboro or whurever?" scoffed Hammond.

"I don' know. I don' know. That Ace. A good chancet to git a good price. I not a-knowin' who Mad was. Whyn' he say he Allen's grandson? Good blood, good blood," pondered the father.

"You knowin' his grampa?" Hammond inquired.

"No, not exactly knowin' him; jist knowin' about him. Ev'body up that way knowin' about Old Man Allen. Rich-like. Good blood. Like, he havin' good niggers. Might pick up some good saplin's, one, or two, or three, if they goin' right. It ain't fur, jist over the Tennessee line a piece."

"They short of money, seem like. Sellin' off."

"Don' seem like. Else, why he hankerin' to buy Ace offn us," Maxwell disagreed.

"Whut you meanin', hankerin'?"

"It say right here, carry him along."

"Whure it say? I don' see nothin' about."

"Right here. Ain't you read it?" the old man extended the folded sheet toward his son.

"I never see this. Never looked on the outside," said Hammond, scrutinizing the lightly penciled message. " 'dear friend,' " he read aloud, " 'bring a long ase with you and i will by it an if it ain't mark with the whip, humbl obdt servt Madison Church.' Well, I never seen that part at all." Hammond read the message again. "Whut all them x's after his name?"

"They kisses, I reckon," chuckled the father.

Hammond smiled wryly. "I takin' Ace, I goin' to ast fifteen hunderd dollars. Mad will pay it an' he got the money. Ain't got no better sense."

So it was settled that Hammond should go to Tennessee for the Allen auction. Blanche was elated when she heard of the plan.

"I got to have me new trogs," she projected enthusiastically. "Miz Forsythe kin make 'em. I got to purty me up, goin' a-visitin'."

"I don' know. We see," Hammond put his wife off. "That kerriage, I don' know will it stan' another long trip. I'll see. I kin go quicker alone, straddlin'. Besides, this is business. You better stay home with Papa. That better."

Blanche wept. "I don' never git to do nothin' or go nowhure," she lamented. "You always gallivantin'. Won't never take me along." She rose, sobbing, from the supper table and stalked out of the room. In a few minutes her footsteps on the stair were heard. That she should go to bed without her after-supper toddy was unthinkable.

The following morning, Sunday, Blanche came down to breakfast as affable as was her wont, and said nothing further about the projected trip. Her husband's word was final and she knew it. She drank more toddies than usual, and Maxwell didn't interfere. Hammond was out of the house, training Mede. Also, despite that their departure was two weeks hence, he took Ace down to the river and forced him to bathe. Later in the day he had Dido cut the boy's hair. The only question was whether Mad Church could raise fifteen hundred dollars.

Blanche drowned her disappointment in hot toddies but kept silent about it. To Hammond's mild remonstrance about her drinking, she had a ready answer: "That doctor man say—he say all I craves."

Maxwell, who enjoyed the girl's tippling companionship, backed her up. "She delicate, kind of like. She needin' it to give her stren'th," he said, and the husband said no more.

Wednesday was the fourth of July, and Hammond on Eclipse set out for Waynesboro, taking Ace along on a mule, whose gait he was aware would slow his progress. If necessary, he was prepared to accept his payment for Ace in young slaves, provided the ones to be auctioned suited his requirements. In

addition he carried in his saddlebags a bag of gold coins to purchase any others that should suit his fancy.

"Ed Allen's grandson ain't a-goin' to be enough zany to pay no fifteen hundred dollars fer that eight hunderd dollar young buck," his father had warned him. "Lucky an' if you git a thousan'. Take it. He a runner, you know."

"Mad hankerin' bad, right bad," said the son optimistically.

"The 'portant thing is young niggers. We're short on 'em, needin' 'em."

"I ain't a-bringin' back no trash to feed. You always says your own self you cain't make no money pourin' good vittles into puny stock."

The older man was pleased that his tutelage had borne fruit.

That Ellen, dressed as a boy, should depart an hour before her master and wait for him upon the highway was the father's plan. He saw no reason why Hammond should not take his slave with him if he wished, but he sought to protect Blanche from the rancor she should feel at the awareness that her husband preferred Ellen's company to her own. Blanche had not risen to see Hammond take his leave, and the ruse was wasted. She appeared to be resigned to his absence, since it left her free to drink as many toddies as she might want.

Just when her plan of revenge took shape it is impossible to know. Perhaps it began to seethe in her befuddled mind the night Hammond had decreed that she should remain at home and it may have been assuming a more definite form from that time forth. In fact, Blanche herself could not have been sure when the determination for action had its inception or when it congealed into a definite scheme.

The afternoon of Ham's departure, Maxwell fell into a doze and Blanche went to the kitchen to obtain a toddy about which he should not know. She felt that he was more censorious of her drinking than he professed and believed that she was justified in swigging one toddy about which he should never know. She found the kitchen filled wth Negroes—Lucretia Borgia, her brood, Memnon, Dite, Big Pearl and the babies, her own Tense—but she missed Ellen, of whose presence or absence her jealousy always made her aware.

"Whure at that Ellen?" the mistress demanded, addressing her question to anyone who might answer it. Since it was directed to no particular person, nobody replied, but rather an ominous hush fell over the Negroes, broken only by the gurgle of whiskey from the jug. Blanche repeated the question, "Whure at, I say, is that Ellen?"

Lucretia Borgia waited for another to speak, but everybody left the answer to her. She hesitated and mumbled, "Ummm, I don' know, Miz Blanche, ma'am. I don' know whure she gone. She right here, time back." Lucretia Borgia had no will to betray her master.

Meg giggled and stifled his mixture of amusement and embarrassment

with his hand over his mouth, whereat his mother slapped both his cheeks with the full leverage of her strong arm. The child was as loyal to Hammond as the woman, and if she had ignored his laughter, the woman, half drunk, would not have seen it. Even half drunk as she was, she surmised what had occurred.

"Time back?" she asked, closing her eyes in her befuddlement. "How much time back? How long ago? Whure at she now? Whure she go to? Don' lie to me."

Memnon and Dite left the room, but Big Pearl sat stolidly, nursing her babies. The twins could not control their curiosity.

Lucretia Borgia's lower lip dropped into a pout, as she hummed rather than spoke the answer, "I don' know ma'am. I don' know, I tellin' you. I don' know."

"Well, I knowin'. She done gone with her masta. That whure she at. I know. You cain't tell me. I know," Blanche screamed, swallowing her hot toddy between breaths and pouring out another. "Ain't nothin' 'ceptin' a whore nigger, that whut she is, jist a whore, with her red earrings. I cain't know whut Hammon' see in the dirty, stinkin' whore, a-pesterin' with all the nigger bucks in the daytime an' sleepin' cuddled up to Hammon' ever' night, her arms aroun' him, a-kissin' his mouf, an', I don' know, mayhap a-lickin' his feet. She would, the dirty nigger, an' her owner ast her. She don' care no more about Hammon' than about the blackes' buck on the plantation, 'ceptin' he kin fetch her red earrings to mark her hisn. Hisn! Now I know why he won't never take me along nowhures. He like nigger stink, he love black meat, he ruther pleasure with a baboon. That whut he would. I knowin' whure she at. You 'on't got to tell me. I know." Her voice rose in a maudlin crescendo until she shouted the final sentences as she left the kitchen, supporting herself by whatever furniture she could reach.

"Better go after her," Lucretia Borgia said to Tense. "Git her in bed, afore you have a puke-cleaning job to do."

The following day Blanche kept to her room. Although there was nothing to be said that they had not hashed over a hundred times before, Maxwell was disappointed that the girl did not come down to sit with him and drink her toddies. Once when he called for Meg to bring him a drink, Memnon brought it instead with the excuse that Meg had gone to carry one to his mistress. Maxwell surmised that Blanche's indisposition, whatever it might be, would not deprive her of her drinks. The July day was humid and through the distorted panes, he could see the heat waves rising from the ground in the butter-colored sunshine. He was half-stupefied with whiskey and he intended to remain so until his son's return; it was the only anodyne for the emptyness of his heart, drained by Hammond's absence.

Blanche lay on her bed, her nightgown open, toying gently with her sweaty breasts. She turned on her side and said to Tense, "Fetch me up here the bigges', blackes' nigger buck we's got on the place. That Mede nigger. He

the one. Go, fetch him along here."

"Whut, ma'am, you wantin' him fer?" Tense had the temerity to ask.

"Nev' mind. Nev' mind. I say fetch him. I knowin' whut I goin' to do; I goin' to pay him back. That's whut."

"Masta not goin' to like. He not leavin' no fiel' nigger come right in the house," Tense demurred.

"I say fetch him, didn' I, nigger?" the mistress demanded. "When I says do somethin', you do it. Hear me? You listen to me!"

"Yesum, mist'ess." Tense started to go.

"Fetch him through the kitchen and up the steps quiet like. Quiet, you hear? Ifn that ol' man a-snoozin' down there in that settin' room hear you comin', I goin' to tear you down. Tear you down, you hear?"

"Yesum, mist'ess. I be still as I kin," promised the slave girl.

"You make noise or leave that Mede make noise, I goin' to shuck you down an' lash you within an inch of your life. You hearin'? You listenin'? Now go and fetch him. Tell him I said."

Tense went. She found Mede stretched naked on his bed, half asleep, with Lucy, her baby in one arm, standing over him, fanning his hot body with a frayed palm-leaf fan which had been discarded by the masters. Tense delivered her summons.

"What she want of me? What mistress want?" Mede was incredulous, for he had sensed his mistress' hatred of him. "I'm afeared," he admitted. "I ain't got no leave to go in that big house."

"Mist'ess say. I tellin' you come along. White folks say," said Tense impatiently. "Mist'ess drunken, an' I reckon she cravin' somebody to pleasure her."

"No!" Mede exclaimed with horror and fear. "I ain't goin'. My masta be mad. He shoot me dead, Masta Hammon'. An' mist'ess don' like me nohow."

"She say—," argued Tense.

"You got to do whut you told," declared Lucy.

Mede trembled as he got to his feet and pulled on his pants and shirt.

"Masta goin' to slice me an' feed me to the buzzards," he said, knowing it to be literally true.

"Like, it ain't whut mist'ess wantin' at all," Lucy opined. "She white, mist'ess is. She ain't a-cravin' no big, black lummox like you."

"That whut she want an' you doesn't do it, she goin' to tell Masta you tried to rape her. I knows," said Tense, shaking her head. "I knows. Ain't nothin' mist'ess won't do. She lie about you soon as look at you. Come along."

"I won't do it. I ain't a-goin' to," Mede protested as he followed Tense between the cabins and across the entryway and into the house.

The Negroes in the kitchen were amazed to see the giant Mandingo following the yellow girl, whom they knew to be executing her mistress' com-

mand. Meg followed the pair and saw them ascend the stairs. Dite looked in quandary at Lucretia Borgia, who only raised her brows. Big Pearl laughed aloud and opened her dress for Old Mister Wilson to nurse.

On the stairs, Tense cautioned Mede to be quiet, but he was unable to avoid the creak of the steps under his heavy tread. In the upper hall he stepped aside for the girl to lead the way to their mistress' room.

"Now, git outn here, nigger, and wait," said Blanche to her maid. "Wait till I calls you. An' don't you be snoopin' and a-listenin'. Hear?"

Tense admitted that she heard. She went out, closed the door, and sat down on the top step of the stairs, her face in her hands. Of the details of what occurred in the room, Tense was never sure, but she formulated imaginings which she assumed to be fact and which were as vivid to her as if she had been present and had seen and heard all that took place. She was terrified, for she knew that, however innocent she might be in the execution of her mistress' commands, her master's wrath would explode against the innocent as well as the guilty if he should ever learn or even suspect Blanche's philandering with the Mandingo. Tense did not love Blanche and it was not Blanche's fate that caused her to tremble, but rather her own and that of all the Negroes on the plantation. They would be the victims of the master's terrible vengeance.

There remained the task of getting Mede silently down the stairs and back to his cabin without the cognizance of the elder Maxwell. Time passed, Tense knew not how much; it seemed to her eons.

At length Blanche's door opened and Mede emerged, walking stealthily. He passed her silently, making his way alone down the stairs without speaking. She looked at him and saw red jewels in his ears, the earrings her master had brought her mistress from Natchez. As he passed her at the head of the stairs, a drop of blood fell from his ear upon the carpet. Blanche had pierced his ears and inserted the earrings without waiting for the apertures to heal.

Might the gift of the earrings have been the purpose of the summons of the Mandingo into the house? Tense believed that it was not. How often in Blanche's absence had she taken those earrings from the drawer in which they lay and turned them in the light to watch them glitter! How she had coveted them for herself. She believed that with them in her ears she would be as beautiful as Ellen and perhaps might become her rival for her master's affection.

With a cloth Tense wiped the drop of blood from the carpet and, going toward Blanche's room, she felt others under her bare feet and cleaned them up. She entered the room and saw more blood on the disheveled bed which her mistress ordered her to straighten. She was able to wipe the stickiness of the blood from the pillows but could not eradicate the stain. The room stank of the serpent oil with which Mede was anointed, but the windows stood open and Tense did not know how to cleanse the stench from the room.

Blanche appeared elated, triumphant. She ordered Tense to have Meg fetch her a toddy, and when he came with two drinks instead of one, she was, despite the warmth of the day, lacing herself into her heavy brown dress.

"Mede done gone?" Meg asked knowingly. "I stirred one fer him too."

"Mede? What you knowin' 'bout Mede, nigger boy? Mede ain't bin here. I ain't seen him," Blanche protested.

The boy laughed aloud and, impudently lifting the second drink from the tray, sat down on the bed to drink it. "Whut Masta goin' to say when he find out? Whut Masta say?" he taunted.

"Your masta ain't needin' to know nothin'. Ain't his business nohow. Nigger, don' you tell him. Don' you tell him. Don' you go stickin' your nose in." Blanche made a show of confidence but failed to conceal her fright from the boy. "Nigger, I's tellin' you, an' you go an' blabber anything about me an' Mede, I's tellin' you, I goin' to have you skinned clean down with the snake, not goin' to be a smidgin of your dirty black hide lef' on your meat."

Meg snickered at the threat. "Who goin' to skin me, Mist'ess? Who goin' to skin me?" he taunted. "I reckon you goin' to be good to me now, so I ain't a-goin' to tell. Ycu do whut I say. You gives me anythin' I wants, Mist'ess."

The mistress capitulated. "Whut you wants, chil'? Whut you wants I should do?" The tone of the questions betrayed Blanche's anxiety.

The boy lay back on the bed and laughed. "I tellin' you," he said, "you goin' to do whut I says. You goin' to give me whut I wants, anytime I wants it, whenever I says."

"You ain't a-goin' to tell?" Blanche half-stated, half-questioned. She reached down and, drawing the youth to her, embraced him.

"I ain't an' you does to me whut you doin' with Mede—any time, whenever I says," Meg exulted. "Tonight, after they all in bed, I come an' we pleasure?"

"Tonight," Blanche conceded. "But come quiet like an' don' tell nobody."

She finished dressing and went downstairs to join her father-in-law.

He roused from his nap at her entrance and bethought him of toddies. Meg brought them with his wonted deference but, unseen by his master, challenged his mistress with a single look directly into her eyes.

Maxwell sniffed as he accepted his goblet. "Whut that stink?" he demanded. "You stenchy, boy?" He grasped Meg and, pulling him toward him, smelled him over and found him clean. "Somethin' stink," he repeated. "Smell like that Doctor Mulbach's Serpent Oil. Send here your mammy, boy."

When Lucretia Borgia entered the room panic seized Blanche, who, aware that the cook knew what had occurred, shrank back into her chair and averted her glance. Lucretia Borgia stood awaiting the question.

"Somethin' stinkin'," declared her master. "That Doctor Mulbach's, smell like."

Lucretia Borgia sniffed audibly three times. "I cain't smell nothin', suh, Masta. I reckon I stopped up or somethin'," she excused her failure.

"You ain't had that Mandingo in the house?" Maxwell demanded sternly.

"No, suh, Masta, suh. Unh, unh. No, suh, I ain't had him," Lucretia Borgia looked fixedly at Blanche as she shook her head.

Blanche was grateful for the generous denial from the woman, for whom she had never concealed her dislike. If the white woman had known it, it was not she whom Lucretia Borgia was shielding; rather it was Mede and all the Negroes of the plantation.

"Sure smell like that Doctor Mulbach's," reasserted Maxwell.

"The wind, it a-comin' from that a-way," Lucretia Borgia nodded toward the cabins. Despite the absence of wind from any direction, Maxwell accepted the explanation and dismissed the cook.

Blanche was reassured; she was safe. After Mede, she did not fear or dread her night with Meg, who, only two or three years younger than herself, she still considered as an infant. He was at least clean and emitted only his racial odor. What she failed to realize was that she would never escape from the boy's sexual blackmail. Thenceforth, she would be at his mercy, in constant terror of his tongue.

The allure of the white woman for Meg was that she was white and forbidden, the fascination of breaking a taboo. The plantation abounded with black and yellow girls, whose seduction would, if discovered by his master, have provoked a scolding, or even a possible switching, nothing more, and they would have assuaged his ripening lubricity. But he was his mother's son, with her passion for dominance which she achieved by efficient service to her white masters and ruthless mastery of the other slaves; he, less cautious, by blackmail of his mistress. He knew the hazard—a fitting death.

Two days later, the day of the Church auction, Blanche sent again for Mede, this time with less temerity. She abominated him no less than ever, but the compulsion to embrace him stemmed in vengeance for her husband's dalliance with Ellen. Hammond could never know, but the revenge was none the less sweet. Blanche resolved that Mede should be at her disposal, that she would enjoy him (or pretend to enjoy him) when she would. With rings in his ears, she had marked him for her own.

Mede felt no sense of triumph. He was under white domination and did as he was told. He was in terror lest his master should learn of his dalliance with his wife, which he had not solicited and did not want, but white commands he had to obey. To him, white flesh was no better than black; he neither preferred nor disliked it. To him, woman was woman, female was female. He accepted what was offered, what was prescribed. He knew the risk as well as Meg, better; but his mistress' procedure was so peremptory that there seemed less peril in complying with her desires than in denying them. Even in the most intimate of their embraces, he sensed her scorn for his blackness, her

contempt for his race, her loathing for his person, but as well, her satisfaction with his maleness. Back in the cabin, he sought to explain his velleity to Lucy, who was alarmed lest he be found out.

The change in his wife's temper, her disposition, her very character, did not occur to Hammond immediately upon his return from his journey, but he soon began to notice that she was more genial and generous, amiable and kind than he had come to expect of her. She was up of a morning, and complained not at all of her physical ills nor of the treatment he accorded her. Except for two or three, sometimes four, innocuous toddies a day, she had ceased her tippling and she seemed to desire no more whiskey than she took. She was considerate of and gracious to the servants, who responded to her reformation with efforts and desires to please her greater than obligation had ever begotten. Even in her rare contacts with Ellen there was no show of irascibility. The vitriol was filtered from such of her jealousy as remained. She called Big Pearl into the sitting room and played with Sophy, in whom formerly she had evinced no interest. Hammond was, of course, pleased, but could only speculate what had occurred to work such an alteration in the girl's nature in his ten day's absence. Whatever it might have been, it engendered his affection, and he found himself dividing his nights between his wife and Ellen, who, however sorrowful when her lover failed to appear, felt herself secure in his love and took no umbrage. Aware as she was of his marital obligations and his desire for a legitimate son, she adored him the more that he should do his duty (at least a part of it) to his wife.

CHAPTER 47

THE expedition to Tennessee had been only a partial success. Madison Church had bought Ace without demur at the price asked for him, had paid for him in cash, and had designated him to be a servant and companion to Triumph. Since Triumph was never permitted out of Mad's sight, hardly outside the reach of his arm, Hammond was at a loss to comprehend how he should be able to absorb more service and companionship than was forced upon him by his purported master who was, in fact, the slave of his small slave. Hammond felt some compunction about his disposal of the slave for such desuetude, but fifteen hundred dollars was fifteen hundred dollars.

What irked him most, however, was his inability to acquire any young slaves at the auction. First, there were only two offered that Hammond wanted at any price. Secondly, Madison, in threat of weeping, had at the last moment forced his mother to specify that no slaves sold at the auction should be removed from the county and that slave families should be offered as single lots, not to be broken or separated. Thirdly, the two boys on whom Hammond would have otherwise made bids were offered along with their mothers, who were past the reproductive age and would have been useless to the Maxwells. Hammond had even a lower opinion of Madison Church than before. He ruled his mother with his ever ready tears and assumed positions and set up conditions entirely unreasonable and incompatible with his own best interests, which impressed the practical Hammond with their utter fatuity. Three of the slaves, two aged women and an imbecile boy had been put up at what may be called auction in reverse; that is, bids were taken for the lowest price to be paid by the Churches for which the bidders would accept the slaves and keep them until they should die. Doc Redfield had a method more direct, cheaper, and in the long run, perhaps, more humane, for disposing of such trash. Hammond had not been the only would-be buyer disappointed in the auction; other men had come, some from considerable distances, to attend the sale only to find restrictions placed upon the use and disposal of the commodities with which they were unable to comply. Bidding was necessarily limited, and prices were resultantly lowered by Mad's refusal to make unqualified disposal of the Negroes that had been his grandfather's.

In the account of his trip that Hammond gave his father, he did not fail to include a report about the Churches, whose guest he had been. He had found them living in what appeared to him to be the acme of luxury, in a great, painted mansion on a broad plantation of gently undulating, fertile hills, well stocked with sturdy Negroes, mules, brood mares, and three handsome jackass stallions, besides swine, sheep, and cattle. A bearded overseer of uncertain age, who had managed the establishment for Allen, was still in charge of it, but Mrs. Church took care to know all that he did. Except as she was deterred

by Mad's petulant interference, she was proving to be an able administrator, somewhat domineering, even high-handed and ruthless, but often restrained by her son's maudlin benignance to all livestock, and especially to the slaves, only less than to his favorite horses.

The Churches were affluent. The need for money, as stated in the broadside, was not an untruth, for Allen, in the course of his long illness which ended in his death, had incurred debts which his daughter was impatient to see paid off. The auction was for that purpose, in addition to which was the riddance of unneeded slaves, stock, and equipment. There was nothing so imperative about it as the Maxwells had surmised. Mrs. Church had taken her respected place in Waynesboro County as her father's heir, and Madison was socially accepted as a bachelor member of a long established family, a matrimonial possibility for every girl in the community.

It gratified Maxwell to learn matters so pleasant about his recent guest so long as the comparison between Mad's state and Hammond's proved the latter to be superior. However, he was equally gratified that Edward Allen had died in debt, as he was himself resolved not to do.

"Busted? Ed Allen! Nobody would think," he gloated.

"But, Papa," Hammond corrected him. "Mad's grampaw wasn't busted. He had a plenty. Ever'thin' paid now."

"But he died owin', didn' he? I aim to die not owin' anybody nothin', not nothin'."

"We not debted," averred the boy, as the father already knew, "an' we not goin' to be."

"You know whure it is buried, that gold, both pots of it, an' if I should die on you? There's enough and more." Maxwell did not specify enough for what purpose, as he rubbed one aching hand with the other.

"You not a-goin' to die, Papa," his son reassured him.

"Not until Blanche have you a boy, Son. Though sometimes the misery so bad I 'most wish."

Hammond picked up one of the gnarled hands and stroked it, which always seemed to ease the pain.

When Hammond saw the red earrings in Mede's ears, his first emotion was anger, which was soon replaced by amusement. He knew at once that it was Blanche's move of retaliation for his gift to Ellen, but it was so jejune, so futile, that it caused him to smile

"Whure you git them bangles, boy?" he asked, knowing the answer.

Mede was terrified to tell, but dared not refuse. "Mist'ess, suh, Masta, please suh," he mumbled, hanging his head.

"What she say when she give 'em to you? Who stuck the holes in your ears? Who put 'em on you?"

"She say wear 'em, not take 'em off, suh."

"Well, we goin' to take 'em off. Whut fer, you reckon, a fightin' nigger

wear bangles in his ears? Jist somethin' to grab aholt of an' tear your ears off. Lean down here," Hammond ordered, and began to unscrew the nut that held the jewel in the left lobe. "Who punch that big hole, and whut he do it with? Wasn't no call to make it so big."

"Mist'ess, suh. She do it with a eatin' fork," the Negro explained, flinching.

When the master turned to the other ear, he found it inflamed, swollen, and festered. "This one sore, like," he said. "Jes' about rotted off. Whyn't you do somethin', take it out or somethin'?"

"Mist'ess say wear 'em, suh, Masta, please. I asted her please take 'em out, but she wouldn't. She say wear 'em."

"I hopin' that ear ain't a-goin' to rot. Jes' about spoil you. Bad enough havin' them big holes," said the master, and pressed the pus from it, at which the slave grunted in his pain. "Don' you ever let nobody do nothin' like that to you agin. A fightin' nigger!"

The jewels were now useless. Having been in a Negro's ears, no white woman could ever be asked to wear them. Hammond looked at them as they lay in his hand, speckled with dried blood, and then he cast them into the weeds at the side of the cabin. Lucy saw where they fell, and later retrieved them. She secretly placed them among her trinkets, the silver dollars she had received at the births of her children, a crinkled small sheet of foil, and a brass breast-pin, but she never wore them.

"Mus' have stopped trainin', the minute I turn my back on you," the master said suspiciously, feeling the slave's thighs and abdomen. "All soft and out of kilter."

"No, suh, Masta, suh," Lucy defended Mede. "He work. He work good, all a time you gone, savin' when that ear make him sick. I make him work."

Lucy, Hammond knew, was truthful. "Well," he said, "we got to do somethin' 'bout them legs an' that sof' belly. Lift Shaz here up on your back an' start a-runnin' with him right now."

Mede was relieved to get away. He knew that his master's mere suspicion would be dire. But Hammond did not suspect. Of course, he knew, even without Mede's confession, that the earrings had come from Blanche, a foolish, simple girl's essay at vengeance, but that there was more to the story never entered his imagination. That his wife, a white woman, should have willing carnal commerce with a Negro, any Negro, not to consider the brutish, burly Mandingo, was literally unthinkable, and Hammond did not think it. He had not forgotten the woman in Natchez who had bought Phrensy allegedly to be her paramour, but he had never quite believed it and had banished it from his mind. Besides, that woman was a foreigner, Dutch or something. It was bad enough that Blanche should have given Mede his present to her and should have soiled her hands on Negro flesh when she punctured his ear lobes.

That night at supper he let her know that he was aware of her prank when he told her, "You most ruint my bes' buck, punchin' his ears. One of

'em mayhap rot off yet. It do, an' it goin' to lessen his price five hunderd dollars. I don' want no one eared nigger aroun' to look at."

Five hundred dollars! Blanche had never thought of the possible seriousness of her act and was duly alarmed. "I never meant nothin'. I never thought it would rot him."

"I knowin' you never," Hammond forgave her. "On'y don' do it no more. A white lady fingerin' a nigger buck ain't nice."

The injury to Mede's ear healed, and the boy was unblemished except for the large punctures. The Mandingo's value was not diminished; in fact it grew with the boy's maturity, the increase of his strength, and the intensity of his training, to say nothing of the trend of slave prices in general.

CHAPTER 48

THE summer days grew hotter and the humid nights provided little respite from the torture of the days. There was scant rain that year, and the sunshine which followed an infrequent shower was more intolerable than that which preceded it. The Tombigbee ran low in its channel and an odor of decay emanated from its banks. The cotton, slow in its beginning growth, was further stunted by the heat and drought, which only stimulated the purslane and other weeds which luxuriated between its rows and which the field slaves sweat to keep under control. Seldom sanguine, Hammond was now despondent as he rode between the rows of cotton to assess the prospect of their yield and to search the brazen sky for the hint of a cloud. Now and again he checked his horse to give a half-hearted admonition to some hoe-hand about the weeding, but the cotton was scarcely worth the chopping if there had been any other occupation for the slaves' time. Moreover, Hammond was concerned about the draft of slaves for market the ensuing fall. There would be three or four men ready for sale, possibly five or six, but, for the rest, they lacked maturity and it seemed desirable to hold them over for another year.

This, indeed, was the real purpose of Doctor Redfield's visit to Falconhurst early in August, purportedly a casual call to inquire about Maxwell's health. The veterinarian had relished so heartily his expedition to Natchez the previous fall that he wanted to make sure of his inclusion in the party for the forthcoming trip—this time probably to New Orleans, since the fears of cholera had abated. It was his plan to introduce the subject only casually, however, since he did not wish to betray his concern. He had hardly finished drinking his first toddy with his host when they were interrupted by an unwonted clatter and bustle in the driveway. Redfield hastened to the open window.

There was no such equipage anywhere in the countryside, and Redfield knew them all, as the four-in-hand coach which met his vision. It was of another era and, from the dust with which it was covered, appeared to have come from afar. Dark red in color, ornamented in gold leaf, with silver handles on the door, it was drawn by four stout horses, three chestnuts and one gray, with a spare chestnut ridden by an outrider.

"Who this?" he asked his host, assuming that the visitor had been expected and fearing that his own visit might be inopportune. "Ain't nobody I knows of got anythin' like it. Must have come a ways."

Maxwell got to his rheumatic legs as rapidly as he was able and joined Redfield at the window. "Mus' be a mistake," he said. "Ain't no fine-haired folks like that a-comin' here," he said and called to Memnon.

The outrider, a stalwart yellow boy, sat his mount, uncertain whether to

get down; another yellow boy crawled from the box beside the black, middle-aged driver and went toward the door. All were attired in sand-colored liveries, faced with blue, and silver buttoned. All wore tight breeches, white silk stockings, and silver buckled shoes. Except for the gray dust on their cocked hats and the shoulders of their coats, they were neat as they were impressive. Memnon reached the front door and held it open and Maxwell hurried into the hall in time to see the boy from the box twist the handle of the coach door and an octoroon boy emerge, smart in a suit of light gray silk, ruffled shirt, and silk stockings, who waited beside the door to hand out another person. There was a pause while the man inside the coach seemed to be putting on his coat.

First an arm and hand appeared which the Negro in gray grasped deferentially to help its owner to alight in safety. Next came a leg in light blue trousers strapped under varnished boots, and at last the whole man, clad in a long gray coat which he was at pains to adjust and from which the Negro flecked a spot of dust and smoothed a wrinkle while the white man rubbed the fatigue of sitting from his knees. It was a ceremony, the man's getting out of his coach.

He was a little man, daintily made, whose hunched back Maxwell thought due to long sitting in the coach until the man began to walk and he saw that it was a permanent hump. The gibbosity was one sided, however, and the right shoulder was straight. This lack of lateral symmetry, along with a rapid mincing, gave to his gait an aspect of trying to fly with one wing broken. So, at least, it struck Maxwell. It was not as if he were unable to walk without assistance, but his Negro grasped his elbow lightly to guide his locomotion. His straight, long hair, what was left of it, for he was balding, hung about his ears and over his collar. Small, sharp, black eyes flashed from his swarthy face which was so marked with sharply defined carmine spots on the cheek bones that Maxwell suspected they were painted there.

"I seek Mister Maxwell," he said precisely, accenting the last syllable and toying with a soft, small moustache with a heavily jeweled hand that was fragile in its length and slenderness. Maxwell was unsure whether the gesture was diffidence or a display of his diamonds.

"I'm Maxwell, at your service, suh. Walk in, please, suh, and set," Maxwell put on his politest manner. "Have Meg stir us a toddy, all 'round," he told Memnon and led the way toward the sitting room, followed by the stranger, who was escorted by his slave. "Who have I got the honor, suh?" he asked before sitting down.

"It is that I am Mister Roche, R-O-C-H-E," the stranger spelled the word out. "Roche, the name of my mother, from New Orleans and La Allouette Plantation, below the city. Jules Adrian Marie Roche, in fact the natural son, so I am told, of the late Governor El Baron de Carondelet, who made provision for my rearing and for my fortune. I am then in part Spanish; my

mother, she was French." He spoke slowly, separating his words and speaking them distinctly as if in fear that he would not be understood. He appeared to formulate his sentences in another language and to translate them hesitatingly into English, which was indeed the fact. His only error was in the stresses which he transferred to the final syllables of his words.

Maxwell was taken somewhat aback by the man's candid confession of his bastardy, in which he seemed to take pride. The host took little cognizance of the name, and did not speak it when he introduced Doctor Redfield and waved the gentlemen to seats.

The gray-clad lackey took up a rigid position behind his master's chair.

The man came directly to the point, "You possess twin boys, is it not so?"

It sounded like an accusation to Maxwell, who was quick to deny it. "I only got one son, name of Hammon'. His mother was a Hammond, gal of old Theophilus, an' he never had no twin. You comin' to the wrong place, wrong man."

Roche smiled and stroked his moustache again. "I do not make myself understood well. My English, it is not good. I am not meaning your son, but I have been told you had twin servants, very beautiful twin boys."

"Oh, them. Yes, I reckon we got a span of saplin' bucks, likely yallers, but not nothin' beautiful, like you sayin' about 'em. Likely an' soun', but not beautiful. They bucks, an' it ain't fitten bucks be beautiful."

"Then I have been misinformed. But is it perhaps that I may behold them?" The man leaned forward in his chair as he spoke.

"I reckon you kin," said the owner. "One a-comin' now with toddies. Othern around somers. Jist alike. You seen one, you seen the othern."

"Like as buckshot," Redfield interposed. "I bin comin' to see Mista Maxwell sence before they born, bein' his veternary, an' I cain't tell 'em one from other."

"They ain't fer sale though," Maxwell set his mouth determinedly. "Look at 'em all you wantin'."

Meg served his master first, then Redfield, lastly the elegant stranger who accepted the drink and set it aside, then grasped the boy and pulled him toward him. Meg looked at his master for permission to resist.

"Gen'leman want to finger you. Hol' you still an' let him," said the master.

Roche embraced the youth's waist with one arm and passed his right hand rapidly over his body and legs, forced his head backward and ran his finger over the sound teeth. Then he kissed the boy on the neck before the head came forward. Meg rolled his eyes in embarrassment but made no effort to escape.

"Oh, but it is you who are mistaken; he is beautiful, beautiful, beautiful," the man in his enthusiasm emphasized; and then modified his evaluation, "barring spots or scars on his body under his raiment."

"Not a pimple, not a pimple," Maxwell asserted pridefully. "Meg," he commanded, "Kick off them trogs an' let the gen'leman look at you. Course,

I sayin', they ain't fer sale."

"I thought you raised for the market. I was informed," said the man, falling to his knees and helping the young slave undress himself.

"We do. You was told correct. But not this span. They worth more later, growed. It hard a-buyin' saplin's to raise in this market. Niggers so high."

The sleek adolescent stood naked for his examination, unembarrassed by his nudity, enjoying the attention he was receiving. He raised his hands over his head to permit the stranger to view his body, knelt and bent forward to spread his own buttocks, capered to show his agility, and only backed away when Roche grasped his genitals.

"Meg!" cautioned his owner, "Leave the gen'leman finger you, how he wantin'."

Roche, still on his knees, drew the youth to him and laid his cheek against his belly. "He is perfect, perfect. I must have him. I will pay, I will pay much."

"No, I reckon not," Maxwell shook his head. "Hammond, that my son, is right fond of this one, and anyways I wouldn't bust up the span. I reckon we wouldn't take five thousand fer 'em, the pair of 'em."

"An' worth it, every cent and dollar of it," Redfield put in, sensing a sale.

"And I pay it. I make you a tender, an offer, gold, cash—if the other is as good and beautiful like this one."

The price was preposterous for two fourteen-year-old boys, but Maxwell assumed an air of disinterest in the belief that he could obtain a larger one, if only this fatuous Frenchman had the money which his garb, his jewels, his slaves, and horses, and coach betokened. "I sayin' I wouldn't take five thousan', not that I would. They ain't fer sale," declared the owner.

"How much? How much do you entreat?" insisted Roche, still on his knees, his arm around Meg, to whom he turned. "How should you love it, beautiful boy, to be my minion? My very own?"

"A house nigger?" asked the boy, shrugging in an effort to disengage himself. "I ain't no fiel' nigger."

"Of course you are not," said Roche.

"An' you feeds your niggers good?"

"All you want to eat."

"I likes to stay Masta Ham's nigger."

"Nev' mind," the owner curbed the slave, whose fate was not for him to choose or even to speculate.

"Is it that I may see the other, the twin for this?" Roche urged, undiscouraged.

"Meg, you find Alph, whure he at, an' you fetch him here," Maxwell commanded. "You hear me?"

Meg was glad to get away and bounded out of the room.

"There remains the price," said the stranger, beckoning to his slave for

help in rising to his feet and resuming his chair. "Six thousand, say; would that interest you?"

Maxwell shook his head, stubbornly. "I reckon we goin' to keep 'em, suh," he said, knowing that he would accept the price, but determined to get all that the buyer would give.

"Mister Maxwell, here, right fond of them two. Uses the othern to dreen his rheumatiz, doesn't you Mista Warren? Or mayhap this one. I kin never tell 'em," Redfield reinforced the owner.

Meg returned, dragging his brother with him. Roche knew that the unclothed twin had been the one that he had seen; otherwise they seemed alike. He summoned Alph toward him and felt in his mouth; then, without rising, he asked to have him stripped. His slave, at the master's behest, came from behind his chair to hold the boy for his inspection. He manipulated the joints and felt the child over. At length he stood the twins together, and found no difference in them except a somewhat deeper navel on Alph and a freckle on his shoulder which Meg did not have. His examination of the second boy was more cursory than of the first, but he was satisfied. He sat embracing them possessively, one on each side of his chair. He must have them.

"I will give seven thousand, Monsieur. That is my last offer, seven thousand. It is enough—all that two such are worth," Roche made a show of finality.

"They cheap at the price. I'd give it, an' if I had it, handy, in cash that is. Mista Maxwell wantin' cash." Redfield knew that Maxwell would be unable to resist such a sum of ready money.

"I tell you whut," Maxwell hesitated. "Make it five hunderd more, seven thousan' and five hunderd, an' we deal. You a-cravin' 'em so, I cain't afford to not 'commodate. But cash, mind. Seventy-five hundred, an' not a dollar less."

"You are mine," Roche turned to the young slaves, and in his exuberance kissed one on the hip, and, drawing the other down, kissed his mouth. "Mine, mine. Seventy-five hundred, it is little enough. I knew that I should buy them, after Mista Brownlee told me about them more than a year ago. He endeavored to purchase them for me, you remember."

"Brownlee, that houn' dog. He wouldn't offer nothin'. Had to run him off of the plantation. He a swindler and a nigger stealer. Low down, low down." Maxwell was not certain enough of Brownlee's part in the hold-up to include that in his accusation.

"They tellin' he die, that Dealer Brownlee," observed Redfield.

"I do not know about his death. I have not heard," Roche declared. "He bought yellow boys for me, some comely ones, and I let him have money from time to time. He was honest with me up until the time he sold me this gelding here, called the surgeon and took the risk himself, warranted he would stay smooth and not grow hair. Now look at him, hair on his legs, and coming

in over his brisket, even whiskers when I don't have them pulled out. Castrating them does not keep them from growing hair."

"Cuttin' 'em, cuttin' 'em don't do nothin' to a nigger save makin' him honery. I wouldn't have one. You not a-cuttin' these two, else I won't sell 'em at no price."

Roche denied any such intention. "But I have bought them already," he protested. "I shall do with them as I like." He looked from side to side possessively at his purchases.

"You kin, I reckons, when you pays," said the old man. "But not that! There's a law; I knows nobody pay it no attention." He heard the limp in the hall. "There he come now," he added.

Hammond came. He kissed his father, greeted Redfield and surveyed the strange assemblage.

"This my son Hammon', suh. Gen'lman come from New Orleans," Maxwell made the introduction. "I sellin' the twins. Reckon you not a-goin' to care."

"Lucretia Borgia say?" asked Hammond

"Seventy-five hunderd dollars," said the father "She git over. We give her two dollars, one fer each one of 'em."

"Lucretia Borgia?" questioned Roche.

"That they mammy," Hammond explained. "We promised not to sell these bucks withoutn her say."

"Oh, then they have a mamma? I must buy her also," Roche said with surprise, as if he had believed the twins had arisen parthenogenetically. "We cannot take them away from her. They will need her. I shall buy."

"We cain't sell Lucretia Borgia," Hammond declared. "She our cook; beside she nursin' a sucker."

"I will buy her," affirmed the Frenchman. "I will give her to her boys, a present to them."

"But she our cook, an' she runs things, jist about. We ain't a-sellin' Lucretia Borgia," repeated Hammond.

"I will buy her," Roche repeated.

"She a thirty-five hunderd dollar wench, her an' her sucker," Maxwell volunteered.

"But they are three, four, or five suckers in her yet," Doc Redfield softened the price.

"No matter. I will buy her," said the stranger. "Jason, you and Albert bring in that iron strongbox. You know where it is, at my feet in the coach."

Hammond had paid but a glance to the slave behind the chair and had failed to recognize him. At the boy's name, he looked at him. "Jason!" he cried. "Is that you, you varmint?"

"Yes, suh, Masta Ham, suh. It is me. Didn't you know?" The boy came forward, fell at Hammond's feet, embraced his legs, and began to cry.

"Whut you run fer?" asked Hammond. "Whure you get this buck?" he turned to Roche.

"You know him, then?" Roche replied." Why I bought him—from Mister Brownlee."

"Brownlee! He was stole, stole from right here at Falconhurst. He Papa's nigger," Hammond exclaimed. "Whut fer you want to go off with Masta Charles?" he turned to Jason.

"Masta Charles told me, Masta, suh. He said I his," Jason explained. "I never knew he would, he and Mista Brownlee, treat me like they did." He wept and sobbed, head bowed in contrition, still clinging to Hammond's legs.

"You meanin' how they carve you up, made you a capon?" Maxwell chuckled in derision. "Servin' you right fer runnin'."

"I never ran, please, suh, Masta. Don't believe I ran. I never knew," pleaded the boy, wiping his eyes with his hand.

"Brownlee gave me a bill of sale," Roche sought to vindicate himself. "I do not have it with me, but I will send it to you."

"No matter," declared Hammond. "He stolen from us and I claimin' him back. I goin' to keep him."

"Won't have him, won't have him back," said his father with resolution. "Won't have no barrow nigger on the place. Never no good. I don't know why Mista Wilson send him along. Half a wench already before he was cut."

"But Papa," Hammond protested. "Mista Wilson—"

"I sayin' I won't have him, an' I won't. Let the gen'leman keep him. He come by him honest."

"But I promise Mista Wilson."

"Nev' mind," said Maxwell, spitting toward the cold fireplace.

"Your new masta good to you I reckon? You seem fat," Hammond temporized with his promise to care for the boy.

"Yes, suh, Masta, he is good, that is he used to be when he first bought me. Kept me for his bed-buck, his sleeping nigger. Now, though, since I gettin' big and growin' hair, he makes me his waitin' nigger, his body servant, and he is strict, slaps me and has me whipped whenever I get careless." The truthful Jason glanced at his master to ascertain whether he approved his statements.

Roche, who still embraced the twins, was unable to stop Jason's outpouring. "That will do," he said sternly. "I told you that you and Albert should bring that strongbox. Did not you hear?"

Jason slunk from the room, aware that he had said too much.

"That spoiled nigger lies," Roche protested in his own defense. "He is indeed my body servant. I keep him for that. Twice he cut my face while shaving me, and I had him corrected with the whip—once, only once. I shall have to do it again to stop his lying mouth."

"Time comes, you got to use the snake," agreed Maxwell, who, intent upon

getting his money, would have sanctioned anything.

"Nigger ain't no worth till he welted up some," Redfield opined.

"We goin' ridin' in your kerriage?" Meg asked his new owner.

"You mine now, you understand? You are going with me," his new master assured him.

The two slaves brought the heavy iron chest and set it at their master's feet. Roche drew a key from somewhere about him, inserted it into the lock, and threw back the lid. The box, Maxwell could see, held a treasure in gold coins, loose, uncounted; he was unable to estimate them. He was for an instant displeased with the bargain he had made; he might have extracted a larger price.

Roche moved his fingers and calculated under his breath, "Seven thousand and a half for the bucks, thirty-five for the wench; eighty-five, ninety-five, ten five, eleven. Eleven thousand. That's right, gentlemen?"

"That about even us," asserted Maxwell. "What we 'greed on."

"Then help me to count it out, please, sir," the buyer appealed to Hammond. "I make mistakes."

Reluctant to place his hands on another man's money, Hammond nevertheless consented. He got to the floor beside the chest, one leg straight, the other doubled under him. He knew there were fifty twenties in a thousand, and confined himself to coins of that denomination. Each thousand dollars, he placed in a pile by itself. He counted seven piles, while Roche, by no means certain of himself, counted four thousand dollars into a single lot. Redfield looked on, resentful of not being included in the invitation to count the money. Once he reached down and picked up a coin, which he bit to make sure that it was gold, so carelessly handled.

Roche pushed the coins he had counted in Hammond's direction. "Better count them," he said. "I am never sure." He did not recount what Hammond had counted, and did not fear being cheated.

When Hammond had certified the sum as correct, Roche toppled the stacked coins together and pushed them across the floor toward where Maxwell sat.

"But you ain't even looked at Lucretia Borgia," Hammond objected.

"That is the wench?" asked Roche. "I shall see her. She is their mamma. It does not matter." Before he closed the box on the remaining coins, he selected two golden eagles and pressed one into the hand of each of the twins. "Keep it to buy you something when we get to the city," he told the boys.

The gesture took Redfield aback. Besides a craving for the money himself, he believed that money was demoralizing to slaves. What could they buy with it that their masters did not provide? Food, clothes for their nakedness, primitive shelter—such were all they needed, all they knew what to do with. The slaves knew nothing of values; the coins might as well have been pennies.

Alph held his gold piece in his hand and looked at it; Meg, for safe keeping, placed his in his mouth.

Roche locked the chest, and told Jason and Albert to return it to the coach. He rose and bowed from the hips toward Redfield and Maxwell. Placing his hands upon the shoulders of the naked boys, he guided them toward the hall.

"You wantin' papers," Hammond protested. "I make 'em and Papa, here, he sign."

With a gesture, the buyer declined any formality. "I deal with gentlemen," he said.

Maxwell suggested dinner which would be ready soon. "Jist a small collation, but right stayin' in the stomick."

The guest's regrets appeared real enough, but he excused himself. He was in haste; he must go. "But the wench, sir. Please bring the wench."

Hammond went to the kitchen to inform Lucretia Borgia that she had been sold.

The woman opened her great legs and faced him. "I ain't a-goin'," she said. "Sold! Sold! Who you reckon goin' to cook your papa's dinner? Who goin' to drive them sewin' wenches? Who goin' to run things here? I ain't a-goin'."

"You goin'. You sol'," Hammond affirmed. "Git you ready an' your sucker. You goin'. Got a good new masta. Treat you good. Me an' Papa, we git alon'. Don't git to think Falconhurst blow 'way 'cause you ain't here." The young man's stern words misgave his emotions of parting from the woman who he knew loved him, who had been his champion through his childhood and his adjutant in his maturity. "Hurrah! And come out soon as you ready," he told her and retreated to avoid a show of tears.

Maxwell and Redfield had followed Roche to the gallery, and all waited for Lucretia Borgia to arrive. Albert, at attention, held open the door of the coach, and Jason stood behind his master, whose hands rested on the shoulders of the twins on either side of him.

Hammond, coming through the sitting room, picked up the garments the twins had shed and carried them to the gallery. "You ain't a-goin' to carry them bucks without no clothes on," he told Roche. "Here they trogs be. Ain't a-costin' you any extry."

"My slaves don't wear raiment like that," the buyer scoffed. "I shall dress them when we reach the city. It is that the day is hot and I prefer them nude."

"They too big to go nekid," Hammond argued.

"They are more beautiful so. It will offend none to see angels without clothes."

Lucretia Borgia came, her baby on one arm, a bundle of clothing in the other. Her eyes were red, but she had wiped away her tears. Roche, who had bought her unseen, looked at her casually and without interest, felt of her biceps and ran his hands over her back and buttocks.

"She is the mamma?" he asked rhetorically. "It is strange, is it not so, that such a goose should hatch swans?"

Dropping the bundle and resting her baby on it, the woman embraced and kissed the Maxwells, first the father and then the son. "I ain't goin' to ever see you-all no more, I reckon, an' you've been so good to me," she said.

Her new owner broke off her lamentations with, "Get in the coach, wench. Henceforth, you belong to these boys. Do what they tell you!"

The boys looked at each other and then at their new owner with surprised approval. With their minds upon the ride in the coach, they dispensed with farewells. They sensed indulgence from this strange little crooked man whom they were to call master.

Lucretia Borgia and her child were first stowed in the coach on the forward seat, the woman's back toward the horses. Next, Jason handed in his master who settled himself in the middle of the rear seat and reached to receive the twins; he placed Alph on the seat beside him and Meg standing between his knees. Lastly, Jason got in and sat beside Lucretia Borgia. The coach was crowded with its six passengers. Albert closed the door sharply and clambered to his place beside the driver as the horses wheeled and the outrider fell into his place with the leaders. The coach swayed as the horses broke into a gallop and the Maxwells stood on the gallery with Redfield and watched it disappear down the lane.

Pleased but baffled, Maxwell breathed, "Whut you reckon?"

"Whut I reckon? Whut I reckon is that you could a got more," Redfield answered his host's question literally. "That hunch-back ninny was set, dead set on them bucks. He had money left. Didn't you see? Could a-took it all."

"Mayhap could," Maxwell conceded. "Could a leastwise kept the wench's sucker, only would a-begot a carryin'-on. It old enough fer weaning an' the Frenchie never looked at it, never know whether she got it."

"Ain't you pilfered him enough?" demanded Hammond. "Eleven thousand dollars fer three niggers—two on'y jist saplin's and a wench comin' to the end of her breedin', three, that is, addin' the sucker."

"See the jackanapes kiss them bucks, kiss 'em right on their black belly? Ain't decent, seem like," Redfield observed. "Mayhap the way folks carry on in New Orleans. Whut you reckon he wantin' 'em fer; whut he goin' to do with 'em?"

"Kin grin' 'em up fer sausage, he a-wantin'. We all gotten our money," said Hammond.

"Pledged not to cut 'em," commented his father. "Over Louisianie way they cuts mos' all they house bucks. Look at that Jason; ruint." He spat.

Redfield, who did not share his prejudice, nodded, "Makes 'em safer, ifn you got ladies aroun'."

The party entered the house and Memnon brought them toddies. Blanche, sure that the stranger had gone, came down the stairs, ready for dinner.

"Glad we shet of 'em. They too smart-alecky, too big fer they britches," she declared of the twins.

Hammond sat on the floor and ran the gold lovingly between his fingers, recounted it and stacked it again.

CHAPTER 49

DITE did her best in the kitchen. Lucretia Borgia had taught her to cook, but the family food, while it was still plentiful and good, lacked the subtle savor that was the result of Lucretia Borgia's skill. Dite was unable to undertake the other tasks that Lucretia Borgia had carried on without apparent effort, and Hammond was compelled to issue their rations to the slaves and assume such other chores as the former cook had vacated. He soon learned how valuable the woman had been, how shrewdly she had ruled her fellows, and of what a load she had relieved his busy shoulders. He missed her not only for the work she had done but also for her wisdom and character, her obsequious aggressiveness, her domination of her domain. She had managed things well and always in the Maxwell interest.

The labor performed by the twins had been minimal and their functions were absorbed by others. Memnon was again called upon to stir the toddies, and while Maxwell complained that the drinks were not so good as those prepared for him by Meg, it was the child's assumption of adulthood and his efforts to put on an adult role that the master missed. There was in fact nothing amiss about Memnon's concoctions. Ellen served as well as Meg had done in helping Hammond off and on with his boots, which was all the assistance he needed with his simple toilet. Hammond had never roused Meg in the night to call upon him for service, but he now realized that no slave slept outside his bedroom door if one should be wanted. He considered installing another boy, possibly Kitty, whom Lucretia Borgia had partly broken for house service, or kitchen service at least, but postponed detailing him in the belief that no other's loyalty, amiability, and readiness would be as great as those he was used to. Meg's going produced a void, small and vague and undefined, in the white man's existence.

Black Willie smelled. Maxwell sniffed at him every night as he went to bed with Willie at his feet and never failed to find him musky. Dido, by Maxwell's command, scoured Willie daily, but his master still said he stank. Alph's musk, such as it was, the old man had not found unpleasant. Willie was larger than Alph, even if no older, dark enough to call black, thicker lipped, flat nosed, with gross, broad feet. After Memnon had been called in the middle of successive nights to apply the paddle to Willie's fundament, the boy learned to lie across the bed without turning and squirming, and Maxwell thought him as absorbtive of his rheumatism as Alph had been, but Willie did not possess the imagination that Alph had had to ape the old man's malady and to limp and complain upon occasion.

Maxwell did not relish having Willie crawling at his feet and seldom in the daytime spread him out and utilized him as a reservoir of his pain. Nor did Willie drink out of his toddy goblet. Those thick, black, everted lips would

have contaminated the glass, as Alph's lips had not done. The employment of Willie was purely practical, with no element of the aesthetic or of the intimate.

Of course, the addition of the money to the pot buried under the tree to some degree made up for the absence of Lucretia Borgia and her brood. Never did the Maxwells, either of them, express regret for making the sale, but the slaves were not forgotten and their successors were not quite adequate to assume their places. Falconhurst felt their absence but did not suffer from it. The fatuity of Roche, his gibbosity, his moustache, his jewels, his coach, his wealth, and his motives were topics of unfailing interest when there was nothing better to talk about. But speculation was vain. Why he should have wanted the twins so much, and, still more, why he should have insisted upon having their mother also were incomprehensible.

The cotton ripened, what there was of it, and was ginned and sent to market. The corn was laid by. Hogs were killed and the meat smoked or salted. Two of the mature field hands were sold to a passing dealer, and the trip to New Orleans with a small coffle of slaves was postponed, much to Redfield's disappointment.

Blanche was again pregnant. She postponed the announcement until she was no longer able to conceal the protuberance of her abdomen. She was not sure who might be the father of the child she carried. She hoped, as she forced herself to believe, that it was Hammond, though she realized that it might be Mede, even less likely Meg. She tried to formulate excuses if the child should be black, but they were too late. If she had accused one of the Negroes of rape, Hammond would have killed him and the thing would be settled. It was now too late. Blanche reverted to drinking more and more toddies, which her father-in-law encouraged as being good for her condition, but they did not increase her amiability. Hammond was elated, as was his father, at the likelihood this time of a male heir.

The arrival of Blanche's mother in November was unannounced and unlooked for. If her visit was inconvenient, it was concealed from her. Blanche, at least at first, was delighted to see Beatrix, who would console her for her pregnancy.

Mrs. Woodford brought tidings of the death of her husband, the Major, who had succumbed to starvation in the belief that his wife and son were poisoning his food. No such thing had occurred, of course, although Dick, by his mother's testimony, had expressed his relief at his father's demise. Beatrix was sure that he had not hastened it.

Dick had assumed sole possession of Crowfoot and from an easygoing, open-handed, indolent youth had turned to a cranky niggard, intent upon squeezing from the soil, the slaves, the draft-stock, and from himself the last iota of revenue possible. The Negroes had been placed upon shorter rations with longer hours, and Dick begrudged his mother and himself the food they

ate. He rose at daybreak or before and toiled till dark, driving and coercing with whip and cudgel to glean the last boll of cotton, the last nubbin of corn. Only, so, he had assured his mother, should he be able to free the plantation from debt, to the glory of God and the salvation of his soul. He had abandoned his preaching—except the exhortation of the slaves on Sunday—but his religion had taken a turn to diligence coupled with stinginess.

Beatrix had suffered Dick's quirks as long as she was able and at length had packed her worn and scanty clothes, summoned Wash to hitch the carriage and to drive her to Falconhurst for at least a respite from her son. In her hollow, querulous voice, which she was unable to hear, she urged her son-in-law to claim Blanche's half of the inheritance (Charles being dead, as she believed) and to assume the management of Crowfoot.

"No. Let Dick have it, ma'am, you an' him," Hammond shouted into her ear-horn. She could not hear him, or pretended so. Her deafness was growing. Hammond repeated, but the woman shook her head to indicate that she did not understand.

"Time the debts off, ain't goin' to be nothin' left noway," he explained to his father, "unlessen the man they owin' never turn up. Don' want we should mix with Dick. He lunatic, seem like, bad as the old Major." Hammond needlessly lowered his voice, and Blanche evinced no concern about her share of the legacy.

Until she had exhausted the subject, Beatrix continued the discourse upon the Major's death and the estate he had left and insisted upon Hammond's claiming Blanche's share. Her empty, unpleasant voice was loud as if she believed the others to be as deaf as herself.

Hammond, unable to reply to her, turned to his father. "Cousin Beatrix tryin' to take her place back from Dick," he said. "She ain't carin' nothin' about me and Blanche and our part. Crowfoot, let Dick have it."

Beatrix continued to censure Dick without actually accusing him of any definite offense until she saw that her breath was wasted. Thereafter, seeing that Hammond was indifferent to her plea, she turned on him.

"Men! Men!" she cried. "Men and their lusts. Ain't got no nigger wenches, seem like. You got to keep your wives always knocked up, always knocked, always in the family way. I tellin' you when you got married, she young and innocent, but you got to have a baby right away, and now another one comin'. Seem like you'd have some shame and give little Blanche here a rest between. Ain't no end to whut men does to women." Beatrix stopped to sigh.

"I was cravin' me a boy," Hammond called into the horn at her ear, unheard.

"We got to bear. It their duty an' their men say. Cain't git away, got to have white babies!" Beatrix ranted. "Glad I through with it, the Major dead. Me, I wouldn't have the best man livin'. I wouldn't believe his say on the Bible.

All a man wants is pesterin'. Cain't tell me nothin' about 'em. I knows. The Major!"

The turgid diatribe abashed Hammond as it chafed him. He did not feel himself censurable, but was unable to refute the charges, unable to make himself heard and understood. He had, in fact, employed a concubine to vent his desire, and his wife's pregnancy was unpremeditated. Beatrix knew that a young man's health was impaired by his continence and, while scorning Ellen, did not disapprove of the use to which she was put, despite that it had not saved Blanche, whom she assumed to be as frigid as herself, from Hammond's attentions and their so visible results.

Her mother's arrival put an abrupt cessation to Blanche's tippling and even Hammond confined his infrequent toddies to the kitchen where Beatrix would not see them. Maxwell, however, was obdurate in his refusal to give up his drinking or to go elsewhere for it. Rather, out of perversity, he drank more than before.

"My rheumatiz," he used as his excuse. "Oncet I let my rheumatiz git ahead of my drinkin', I'll never ketch up to it."

Beatrix shook her head, whether in implication of her failure to hear what was said or of her disapproval of Maxwell's medicament he did not know. Her failure to hear was often an unwillingness to consider, although her deafness was real enough.

To the woman's insistence upon family prayers the morning after her arrival, Maxwell made the concession of getting out of the room to avoid participation. Hammond was out of the house, and Maxwell, who took no stock in religious observance, refused to permit the summoning of the household slaves, except Tense, who was Blanche's own to do with as she might choose. It was Maxwell's belief and experience that religious practices made his slaves, especially the younger ones, restive and dissatisfied with their state. Negroes were soulless brutes, and he had only a little more trust in their masters.

" 'Lessen you comes to Jesus an' kneel down at his feet, you goin' to the bad place, sure are a-goin' straight to the bad place, Cousin Warren, you and Hammond along with you," Beatrix threatened him. "I hates to think about settin' up there in heaven with Blanche and a-watchin' you all burn."

"I hope, ma'am, I hope." Maxwell did not say for what, but it made no difference for his guest failed to hear him and did not mark the irony, if there was any, in his tone.

When the prayer meeting was assembled—Beatrix, Blanche, Tense, and Old Wash, who had been summoned for the function—Maxwell took his goblet and went into the dining room. He could hear Beatrix as she haltingly read aloud from the Bible, and later after she and the two slaves had knelt—Blanche being excused because of her pregnancy—the rise in her voice was superfluous as she prayed for his and Hammond's salvation. Indeed, she prayed long and passionately, with many sobs and sighs, for everybody, for

Charles, and Dick, and the Major, for Blanche and her children, born and unborn, for herself, and incidentally for the slaves, but it was in behalf of the Maxwells, father and son, that her suit was loudest.

The prayers concluded, Maxwell returned to the sitting room and rather pointedly, it seemed to Beatrix, called for Memnon to bring him a toddy. It gave the woman to know that her advice to the Almighty about the governance of His universe had not been heeded, but it did not deter her from further solicitations. Henceforth, however, Beatrix found other places than the sitting room for her meetings, and while Maxwell was always invited he was never urged to attend them. He cared not at all how much she prayed so long as he was not constrained to listen and so long as his slaves were not demoralized by her proselytizing. Often it seemed to him that God needed guidance, but not from Beatrix Woodford.

The primary purpose of the visit was to enlist Hammond to claim his wife's part in the Major's estate or at least to oust Dick from its management. Beatrix had not been aware that her daughter was pregnant again, but, when she found Hammond indifferent to the supposed legacy and Blanche, as her shape indicated, so close to her lying-in, she resolved to wait to see her new grandchild. There was nothing to draw her home, and here she at least got enough to eat without Dick's grumbling. She believed that she was welcome at Falconhurst, as, indeed, she was; for, even if she had not been Blanche's mother, she was born a Hammond.

Blanche, when she was questioned, had no notion of the duration of her pregnancy or when it might be expected to terminate. She had lost track of time, and, anyway seemed reluctant to talk of the event. This her mother charged to female modesty. The bulge of the girl's paunch betokened that her parturition might be soon. Beatrix had her first grandchild to admire and to dandle while she awaited the second.

Blanche, who, quite aside from her pregnancy, was no longer able to get into her challis dress, gave it to her mother. It was somewhat soiled but little worn. It heightened the leathery sallowness of the woman's lined face, and Hammond, who had been allured more by the dress than by the girl who wore it, cogitated whether his wife might someday come to this sour favor. The worn, dark brown woolen in which he had always seen Beatrix was more befitting to her ochreous skin and eyes and teeth.

Beatrix had been at Falconhurst about three weeks when another visitor arrived. The gentlemen were up early, eating their breakfasts of eggs, ham and red gravy. The food was subtly better than usual, the ham more tender and better done, the gravy richer and redder, the yellow of the eggs higher in their frame of white.

"Dite, she learnin' how at last," commented the older man.

"Lucretia Borgia come back, suh, Masta, suh. That whut! Lucretia Borgia back," said Memnon, pouring coffee.

"Seem like; taste like. Reckon Dite goin' to soon learn," Maxwell replied to the servant.

"But she back, suh. Lucretia Borgia come last night on a mule," Memnon reiterated.

"Got to tear this nigger down agin, I reckon. Lyin' so. Got so as he cain't tell true," Hammond said. "Want I should shuck you down an' touch you up aroun' the edges, like the other time?"

"Naw, suh, please, suh, Masta, suh; naw, suh. I good, I tell true. I be good. I ain't lie to you, Masta, suh," the Negro pleaded.

"You lyin', you know you lyin', boy," Hammond said sternly. "Whut fer you want to lie like that?"

"Yas, suh, Masta, suh," Memnon admitted the accusation. "On'y she back, she here, Lucretia Borgia."

Hammond pushed back his chair. "You lyin', I goin' to hang you up this very mornin'. I goin' to take the skin off you agin," he said as he rose and went toward the kitchen.

There she stood, Lucretia Borgia, before the fire, giggling nervously.

"Lucretia Borgia!" Hammond exclaimed. "Whure you come from? Your masta knowin' you come back? He say? He lettin' you?"

"Masta Ham, suh, Masta Ham!" the woman cried, throwing her big arms around him.

"Whut you doin' here?" the master demanded.

"Cookin' you-all's breakfas'," she answered literally.

The young man was glad to see her, to have her back, whatever might have brought her. "Come 'long with me. Papa is in the dinin' room. Come 'long and see him," Hammond pushed the woman before him.

If Lucretia Borgia had been white, Maxwell might have believed he was seeing a ghost, but there was no doubting the evidence of his own eyes. "Whure you come frum?" he asked. "Lucretia Borgia, you know you sold! Whut fer you come back?"

"I come back from New Orleans, suh, please suh, Masta, suh," the woman replied. "I cou'n't stan' it."

"You never run away?" he asked in horror.

"Yas, suh, I reckon I did, suh," the woman said contritely. "I reckon that whut you goin' to call it, suh. On'y I ain't a-goin' back, I ain't. You goin' to whup me. I know you goin' to whup me. Goin' to hang me up an' snake me. You kin, Masta, suh, you kin tear all the skin offn me. On'y I ain't goin' back. I ain't."

"Oh, yes you is, Lucretia Borgia. You is too a-goin' back," Maxwell said quietly. "Correctin' you, we goin' to leave that to your masta when he come fer you, but you know whut runnin' means an' you know whut he goin' to do to you. You goin' back all right. You sure is!"

The woman broke into tears. "Please, Masta, suh, keep me here. This my

home. Whup me, you wantin' to, Masta. Only let me stay with you," she sobbed.

"Dry up! Dry up!" the master commanded. "Cryin' ain't a-goin' to save you. Whut fer you run? You know it ain't right. Your new masta not good to you? He starve you or somethin'? You looks right good an' fat."

"Masta, he right good. He all right. Feeds good. White vittles," Lucretia Borgia specified.

"Then whut?" asked Hammond.

"It them two varmints. That whut it is, suh, them varmints. Alph and Meg."

"The twins?" asked Hammond. "How they ac'? Whut they do?"

"I theirn. My masta, he give me to 'em fer theirn. I got to wait on 'em, an' dress 'em, an' shuck 'em, an' wash 'em, an' do fer 'em, all the time," she explained.

" 'Tain't right." Hammond agreed, "givin' one nigger to another. 'Tain't right, only it the way they does in Louisianie."

"I reckon he never give you to them twins, Lucretia Borgia," the older man questioned her story. "On'y you their mammy an' he lettin' you take care of 'em fer him. Whut he wantin' of you, whut he bought you fer? Don' seem he bein' hard on you."

"That ain't all," Lucretia Borgia countered. She was at ill ease, not knowing how her charge was to be received. "That ain't all. I got to call them varmints 'Masta, suh.' Yas, suh, Masta, suh, I got to say 'Masta, suh' to them niggers. I ain't a-sayin' 'Masta, suh' to no nigger, least not to them two that I had my own se'f, an' raised up my own se'f, an' whupped into house niggers fer you-all."

The old man shook his head in disapproval, and Hammond said, "I reckon, if your masta, your white masta, say you name them li'l bucks 'Masta, suh,' they ain't no other way. They treats you good?"

"Yas, suh, Masta," Lucretia Borgia begrudged the necessity to reply. "They treats me good enough, I reckon. On'y they always sayin' they goin' to tear me down an' whup me good. Always sayin', threatin' like. They ain't done it yit, but they always sayin' an' laughin' 'bout how funny I'd look, dancin' nekid under their snake, an' how I squeal while they goin' to rub in the pepper."

"Your masta wouldn't let 'em, not 'lessen you do somethin'," Hammond said.

"He leaves 'em slap my face, an' pinch me, an' bite me when they chaws on me. He sees 'em do it an' don' say nothin'."

"When they chaws on you?" Maxwell asked. "Whut fer does they chaw on you?"

"Tittie milk," Lucretia Borgia declared factually. "My masta reckon tittie milk goin' to keep 'em bucks young an' purty. Makes me take out an' suck

'em mornin', noon, an' evenin', an' makes 'em suck me dry ever'time."

"Ever hear sech a thing?" his father looked at Hammond. "Keepin' 'em young. Think he'd want 'em to grow up. Got milk enough fer them an' fer your sucker, too?"

"Oh, he taken Clarabelle offn me an' sen' her down to his plantation so that I have tittie fer them big bucks. I ain't seen Clarabelle sence I got to New Orleans. I reckon he ain't sell her or give her away or somethin'. When I ast him, he say she git along. He ain't carin' nothin' 'bout nothin', savin' them bucks. No, suh, Masta, suh, nothin' 'bout nothin'."

"An the twins yet a-milkin' you?" Maxwell was unable to credit the statement.

Lucretia Borgia drew a swollen breast from her bodice. "Look," she said. "That their tooth marks whure they chaw on me, masta, suh. Make me kneel down to 'em, while they chaws me, one on each tit."

Hammond lifted the scarred breast, examined the lesions on it that looked like tooth marks. Lucretia Borgia might stretch the truth, but she did not lie. He believed her story. Her lot appeared to him somewhat unpleasant, but not too hard. Her milk would soon dry up. If her owner instructed her to suckle her sons in the belief that it would prolong their youth, it was not Hammond's place to object. The boys had, perhaps, struck and bitten her, but they had not beaten her, and, despite their mirthful bluster, were not likely to. Maybe they remembered the every-morning spankings she had given them. What Hammond was unable to understand was the woman's agonizing loss of her status; it seemed to him easy that, since the boys did not abuse her, at least not badly, she should accept their mastery and call them her masters. The Maxwells, it is true, did not make a present of one Negro to another, but Hammond knew that it was not uncommon in Louisiana for masters to give slaves to their favorite slaves, and slaves were not reputed to be too considerate of their sub-slaves.

"How they come on, them twins of yourn?" Maxwell asked without much caring.

"They good, Masta, suh. On'y they mean; they awful mean, suh," the mother said. "Meaner, seem like, ever' minute."

"They new masta, he still likin' 'em?" the white man asked with greater concern for the answer.

"Yas, suh! He sure do," Lucretia Borgia chuckled in a kind of derision. "That whut makin' 'em so mean. He ain't whup 'em, neither one of 'em, not even oncet, nor even slap 'em or kick 'em. Leaves 'em carry on jest like they wants. Sure is awful. Don't have 'em do nothin', 'ceptin', that is, stan' by his place while he eatin' an' he feedin' 'em right offn his own plate, an' they drinkin' wine right outn his glass. Yas, suh. They drunken ever' night. Standin' nekid, plumb nekid, without a stitch on 'em, right by they masta's chair, savin' on'y their earbobs an' they finger rings with little white rocks

a-twinklin', jest like that ring of Miz Blanche."

"Di'mon's!" Hammond guessed. "Di'mon's wasted on niggers, nigger bucks."

"Yas, suh, that right, Masta, suh. That whut they calls 'em. I got to say they purty, right purty, them little bucks, standin' there, them little rocks twinklin' in the can'lelight. Jason, he wait table on his masta, do ever'thin' fer him, wash him, undress him, put him to bed, take him up mornin's, put his clothes on, ever'thin'. An' they masta, he not care whut them young bucks does to Jason. No, suh, don' care at all. He jest laugh when they pinches Jason, or slaps him, or makes him spill things."

"They out of han', I reckon," Hammond said. "Had ought to be hung up, hung up by they heels with a little snakin'."

"Yas, suh, Masta. Sure ought," the woman went on. "Course, they different when Masta takes 'em along out with him, to drive in his kerriage, or to show 'em to the gent'men down at Maspero's Exchange, or to mass—"

"A papist. Makin' them niggers papists," Maxwell interrupted the tale in an aside to his son.

"Then they wears clothes," Lucretia Borgia said. "Fine clothes, all slick an' smooth an' sof', an' fine stockin's, an' shoes."

"Silk?" Hammond suggested.

"Yas, suh, that whut they calls it, somepin' like that. But gittin' 'em dress', gittin' they clothes on! Lord A'mighty! Me? Masta tell me wash 'em, wash 'em all over, an' dress 'em devils. They is devils, suh. They kick like young jackass, they scratches an' bites me an' slaps me hard, hard as they kin, won' hol' still or nothin' while I scrubbin' 'em. I tells Masta, on'y he laugh an' don' do nothin', say I theirn to do with how they likes. But when they dressed with clothes on, an' them earbobs an' rings a-twinklin', they good, they so good lasses or somethin'. On'y when they comes home, an' I shucks 'em nekid agin, they won' melt butter, walks so proper that they like angels or kittens or mo- they worse than ever, jumpin', caperin', teasin', pesterin', hittin', hittin' ever'body, that is, 'ceptin' the masta. Never do nothin' to him, 'cept makin' him laugh or beggin' fer a bite offn his fork."

"Whut you reckon the fool mean, carryin' on like he do, like Lucretia Borgia say he do?" Maxwell turned to his son. "Seventy-five hundert dollars worth of good nigger meat, jest a-wastin'!"

"He do, he sure do, Masta. I ain't fib to you, ain't tol' you half. Why, Masta hire a white man, white, hire him an' pay him money, jest to come an' learn them bucks to talk that lingo like he talk. That white man crack the head of Alph 'cause he won' learn, an' Alph tell Masta. I don' know whut Masta say in his kin' of talk, but he mad, mad, an' white man say he not do it agin. He skeared of Masta, that white man is, an' I reckon that whut he say."

"Them bucks kin talk, talk good as you or me," Maxwell said to Ham-

mond. "An' that man un'erstan's American talk. Don' need no learnin'. They niggers."

"That right, Masta, suh. Sure kin talk. They talks too much. An' sleep, them niggers sleeps right in big bed with they white masta, right in big bed with mosquito guard hangin' down over it. Masta wantin' 'em clean to sleep with," Lucretia Borgia explained.

"Well, I reckon mayhap he got rheumatiz like me an' a-dreenin' it into 'em," the ailing man hit on the reason and accepted it as valid.

"Naw, suh, Masta, suh, not on the foot of the bed," the slave corrected him. "Up alongside their masta, right in bed under the quilts with him, they heads right on the bolster alongside hisn, he in the middle atween 'em bucks."

"Bucks!" Hammond bit the word in disdain. "Sleepin' with buck niggers."

"Them Frenchies in New Orleans ain't got no shame in 'em," said his father in disgust.

"An' Jason fetch 'em chocolate in bed ever' mornin' jest like they masta. Cain't pile out, cain't set foot on floor afore they have they chocolate," Lucretia Borgia added detail to detail of her narrative.

"That enough. I don' want to hear no more, Lucretia Borgia," Maxwell silenced the woman.

"But you goin' back the way you come," said Hammond. "You hisn an' bought an' paid for. You goin' back."

Lucretia Borgia assumed her stubborn, wide stance and, arms akimbo, defied her former master. "No, suh, please, suh, Masta, suh, I ain't a-goin'. I go to stay right here."

"You a-goin'. You goin' to do whut you tol'," Hammond said firmly but without anger.

"I ain't," affirmed the woman.

"You know whut it mean an' ifn your masta got to come fer you, don' you? Mean you a runner, a ordinary runner, an' you know whut he goin' to do to you—hang you up upside down an' snake all the skin offn you, that whut. Ifn you go back your own se'f, mayhap he won' do nothin'," Hammond argued.

"I not a-goin' back an' call them niggers 'Masta, suh.' I ain't goin'," Lucretia Borgia maintained. "You kin drive me off, on'y I goin' to turn that ol' mule an' go the other way."

"Whut ol' mule? We ain't a-goin to give you no mule," declared Maxwell.

"My mule," Lucretia Borgia explained. "My ol' cripped mule I brung from New Orleans."

"Whure you git any mule?" the old man demanded.

"I bought it, bought it with money I done took out of Meg's box, suh," Lucretia Borgia confessed candidly. "They, both of 'em, got lots of money they masta give 'em. An' I pay a yaller boy who kin write, a light yaller boy

who usten to be Masta's pet afore he gotten them twins, to write me out a pass, suh, fer the patterolers."

"A real sure enough runner," Maxwell nodded. "You got to write a letter to that white son-of-a-bitch to come an' git her. I 'on't care whut he is or whut he do, he bought her an' pay fer her. An' you cain't trust her to go back alone by her own se'f, mule or no mule. She actin' like a mule."

There was no other honorable course. Lucretia Borgia was dismissed to go back to the kitchen to resume her former duties until her owner should come or send for her.

Breakfast over, Hammond wrote the letter. It was a task, for he was unused to writing. The letters wouldn't come right, the ink spattered, and Hammond sharpened and resharpened the nib of his goose-quill. An hour's agony over the brief note and it was finished and ready for his father's approval.

"How am I goin' to back this letter?" he asked, "not a-knowin' his name? He never said."

"He said all right, time 'fore you come in, on'y I disremembers. Somethin' like Roach. He'll git it. Roach close enough," said his father. "First, ast Lucretia Borgia. She'll be knowin'."

Memmon was sent to bring the runaway into the sitting room.

When she came, Hammond said to her, "Whut the name of your new masta? Whut he call hisse'f?"

"Somethin' like Roach," the father suggested.

"Soun' like, somethin' like that," she agreed.

"You doesn't know how to spell it out?" Hammond asked hopefully.

"That be readin'. I don' know readin', Masta, suh. You knows that a'ready."

Stumped for the want of a first name for his correspondent, Hammond addressed the letter merely to "Mister Roach, New Orleans." He could not be sure it would be delivered; in fact, he would not admit to himself the hope that it might not. He had done his best and his conscience was salved. However, he would be reluctant to give the woman up again, despite that he saw no reason for her coming back.

"I goin' to sen' Mem to the Post Office with it," Hammond said to his father.

"That nigger cain't sen' no letter," the father replied. "I needin' him to stir my toddies. Wait till you goin' to Benson your own se'f. Ain't no press."

Hammond grasped the excuse for delay, but the following Saturday he went himself to Benson, mailed the letter, and went to Pearl's for the fights. He could hardly expect a reply short of a week, but a week went by, two weeks, a month, and nothing came, and his letter was not returned to him. He assumed that it had been delivered. Lucretia Borgia went on working, more fearful when her former owner went to town than he was himself, lest he should get a reply to his letter. But none came. None ever came. Lu-

cretia Borgia was again a Maxwell slave. She could not, of course, be sold, but the Maxwells had no desire to sell her. She was her old self, obsequious to the whites, dictatorial to her fellow slaves, efficient, obliging, indispensable. Hammond was glad she was back, and dreaded the day when her owner should arrive to take her away. But he did not come.

CHAPTER 50

FOR Blanche, childbed impended. She grew larger and larger, and her mother worried about the delay and about her own prolonged absence from home. Beatrix was accepted as a part of the Maxwell family, walking as if in a dream; unhearing, her hollow voice, if not unheard, was ignored.

In January, Blanche developed pains in her abdomen and it was believed that her time was upon her, but she recovered and nothing happened. She was content. Her breasts enlarged and she felt the baby in her belly kicking the walls, but a languid euphoria enveloped her. She watched her father-in-law drink his toddies and knew that, but for her mother's presence, she would drink with him, but no craving for whiskey beset her. She was content.

Cotton planting time arrived and Hammond plowed his fields and put in his crop. The Mandingo exercised and Lucy rubbed him with serpent oil; he ate and thrived. Hammond looked at him from time to time and considered that it was wasteful to maintain so futile a luxury, but the elder Maxwell insisted upon keeping him as a stallion. His progeny, as they were born, were stalwart and healthy. There continued to be no word from Lucretia Borgia's owner, and she went about her duties. If Hammond should go to New Orleans the following fall, he planned to take the fugitive along, find her owner, and return her.

Hammond had been tacitly impatient with Blanche's prolonged pregnancy, but his impatience ceased. The baby would come when it would come. He was vexed with her failure to reckon the date, but vexation was vain. He was happy with Ellen.

March, with its bluster, showers, and sunshine, with its dogwood and wild roses, came and went. The first of April, Blanche awoke in labor. The house was solemn. Lucretia Borgia was the only person of any use. Tense wished to help but knew not what to do. Beatrix went around asking questions to which she was unable to hear the answers. Maxwell swallowed impatient toddies. Hammond sent Memnon riding to Benson to summon Doctor Murrey, who would probably be drunk upon his arrival but who was the only physician in the community and whose experience in such matters was great enough to enable him to deliver a child, drunk or sober.

Blanche's recurrent pains begot groans as she lay and waited for the doctor, but there were no such screams of terror as had heralded the birth of her former child. Her mother, who sat beside the bed and rocked in her anxiety, was unable to hear the groans of her daughter but in her sympathy suffered more than Blanche in her struggle to void the baby. Lucretia Borgia pattered back and forth between the kitchen and the bedroom, fetching hot pepper gruels to stimulate labor and stooping by the bedside to massage Blanche's abdomen in an effort manually to force the fetus downward. Tense hung

over the foot of the bed in a futile desire to help, but was able to do nothing except to fetch such things as Lucretia Borgia required from other parts of the house.

Memnon was gone for hours, while Maxwell drank the toddies which Lucretia Borgia found the time between her trips upstairs to prepare for him, and Hammond limped the floor and cursed Memnon for his delay. It was three o'clock before the clatter of mule-hoofs on the lane announced the messenger's return. Hammond met him at the door as he crawled from the mule's back.

"That Masta Docta, he cain't come. He down sick—got lung fever, Miz say," the Negro informed his master.

"Did he say? Did you talk to him? Did you tell him who a-wantin' he should come quick an' whut fer?" Hammond demanded.

"Naw, suh, Masta. I never seen him. Miz, she wouldn't leave me inside," Memnon explained. "But she done say."

"You damned triflin', slothy nigger. I had ought to know better than send you. Had ought to go my own se'f," Hammond muttered and went in to tell his father the tidings and to consult with him about what should be done.

"Lung fever? Liable, jest drunken!" was the older man's comment. "Well, I reckon the yarb woman, Doc Redfield's Widder, got to get her. Reckon she as good as any doctor anyways; has grannied enough women, white an' black, she had ought to know how to ketch a chil'."

Hammond sighed his acquiescence, "On'y whut Cousin Beatrix goin' to think? How I goin' to make her hear that there ain't no man doctor?"

"Don' try. Ain't no other way," said the father.

Hammond went upstairs to tell Blanche that Doctor Murrey was unavailable and that she should just have to suffer while he should go himself to bring Redfield's wife. He would make all the haste that Eclipse was capable of, he promised her.

"Why ain't that other doctor come instead of Murrey?" Blanche asked.

"Whut othern?"

"That young doctor. Doctor Smith," said Blanche. "He real nice. Ruther him than Miz Redfield."

"That blackguard! That scoun'rel! That houn'!" ranted Hammond so loud that Beatrix trumpet caught the sound and she directed it toward him. "He ain't no doctor man yet, that Willis Smith, an' ain't never goin' to be. Goin' aroun' spreadin' the clap through clean niggers, makin' more sickness than ever he cure up. I'd sooner have Mede, sooner have that Mandingo ketch a chil' as that Willis Smith."

A spasm of pain overtook Blanche and forestalled any argument. Her husband, ignoring her suffering in his indignation, stalked out of the room, down the stairs, and toward the stable.

Maxwell recognized the hoofbeats of Eclipse's canter as Hammond rode

down the lane and knew his son had gone for Mrs. Redfield. The house was quiet except for the creak of the stairs as Lucretia Borgia made her heavy way from Blanche's bed to the kitchen and back again and for the loud ticking of the crazy clock above the cold fireplace. Two toddies later, cooled and slowly drained, he heard the crow-hop gait of Mrs. Redfield's tired horse under the urgence of the hickory wand she used for a whip and the turning wheels of her vehicle, and he knew that the herb-woman had come. He rose stiffly, made his way to the window, and saw her crawl down from her lopsided seat, gather her paper bag of herbs, and stalk with brisk importance toward the house. Without waiting for the door to be opened for her, she entered, and Maxwell heard the stairs under her firm tread as she ascended them. Maxwell felt easier, now that help had come.

Hammond, with Doc Redfield on his dun gelding, followed the woman down the lane a furlong behind her buggy. Redfield, with nothing else to do, had come along for a visit while his wife should perform her professional duties. He was set up that his wife should be summoned on so notable a mission and sought to partake, however vicariously, of her distinction. Maxwell was glad of somebody to talk to through the impotent vigil.

After the greeting, the host ordered Memnon to bring drinks and urged Hammond to swallow one to relieve his anxiety about what was occurring upstairs.

"Ain't nothin' to worry you, now she's come," opined the herb-woman's husband. "The Widder, she purty good—purty handy with sech goin's-on."

"Had ought to be handy by this time. Been a-bringin' babies, white an' black, fer aroun' thirty year, I knowin' of," Maxwell harked back in an essay to allay Hammond's fears.

"Reckon it might be goin' to be a girl agin?" Hammond demanded reassurance.

"Cain't be," said his father. "Not an' her stickin' out so big in front like she is. Kin always tell, almos' always, by the size of a woman's belly. This one's a boy, sure."

"Gittin' it out: that's the trouble, whichever," Redfield emphasized his wife's import. "But she gits 'em, the Widder does, whole an' without smashin', ifn anybody kin. Jest gifted that a-way."

The random conversation touched on many subjects, but lightly—the Mandingo, his condition and fitness for a fight, the size and vigor of his babies, cotton, the current market for slaves and the prices they brought, Madison Church and his good fortune, a suitable diet for young slaves, tribal differences, the virtues and dangers from infusions of white blood in Negroes, anything to avoid discussion of the weight upon all their minds as to what was occurring on the floor above. Nobody was interested in what was said. Hammond, between sips of his toddy, limped from window to window, looked at the landscape and assessed the weather. Not that he cared.

"Redfield! Redfield! Come up here! Hurry!" came his wife's loud voice from the upper hall. It carried no tone of excitement or distress, but it wouldn't, since Mrs. Redfield was a placid woman, not unused to emergencies and taking them in stride. Redfield detected an implication of terror in the summons, however.

He set down his toddy glass, rose, and went into the hall. "You callin' me? You wantin' me, Widder? Whut you reckon I kin do?" he asked as he made his way up the steps.

"Come up here!" the woman repeated. "Come quick!"

Redfield hastened as best he was able. "It come yit?" he demanded as he reached the head of the stairs.

"It come!" the midwife said in a loud whisper. "It come! Only it ain't white! It a—a nigger! Whut we goin' to do?"

The astounded man was taken aback. He did not believe her. "A nigger! You wrong; it ain't no nigger!" he contradicted.

"You sayin' I don' know a nigger, me who have ketched a hunerd black suckers in my time?" the woman said with indignation.

"Whure is it?"

"On the bed. I laid it on the bed till I could call you. Whut we goin' to do with it?"

"If it a nigger, like you sayin', we jest cut the cord short an' let it bleed. Mista Maxwell, he don' want no nigger chil', not his own, not from his wife, he don'." Redfield was resolute. By destroying the baby he calculated to save Hammond the necessity. As he followed his wife to the bedroom, Beatrix Woodford emerged from it, weeping, but her head high, her tread firm, and went into her own room.

Blanche lay exhausted, but calm and comfortable, relieved now of her long burden. Her baby was not beside her where the herb-woman had left it. Blanche opened her eyes at the turning of the door on its hinges.

"Whure is it? Whut you do with it, your chil'?" Mrs. Redfield demanded.

"Mamma, she mad! She done took it an' squshed it agin the commode an' throwed it over there in the corner," Blanche answered unmoved. "She say it a nigger. I 'on't know how come."

The naked baby lay on the floor in the corner of the room under a window, its skull crushed. Mrs. Redfield picked it up into her arms and held the warm, dead body toward her husband.

Redfield looked at the beautifully formed little boy, stuck his forefinger into its soft belly. "The Mandingo, Ham's Mandingo," he breathed. "Look jest like him; an' big, must be fifteen pounds. Jest like the Mandingo."

"An' a boy," declared his wife. "They a-wantin' a boy."

"But not a nigger boy," said Redfield. "Ham's mother-in-law, her a-doin' it save me from gotten to do it. Me, I'd haten to got to kill it—it so big an' purty an' soun' like."

"Is it a nigger, sure 'nough?" Blanche asked but was indifferent to the reply.

Redfield sighed as he went down the stairs, trying to make up his mind what to tell the Maxwells.

As he entered the sitting room, Hammond looked at him, expectant, and the older man asked, "Well?"

"It dead. Come dead, I reckon," said Redfield.

"Dead," sighed Hammond. "A boy?"

"A boy. Made purty like." Redfield answered.

"How Blanche? Kin I go up now? All over?" the baby's father asked.

"She all right. That is, she goin' to be," said Redfield. "But no, no! Don' go up. You don' want to see it. Purty bad messed up. You don't want to see it. Let the niggers bury it. Whure that cook-wench, that Lucretia Borgia? She bury it."

"I cravin' I should see him. A boy! Dead!" declared Hammond, starting toward the stairs.

"Not yit, not yit!" Redfield grasped his arm in an effort to detain him, but the young man eluded him.

In the emotional turmoil, the Woodford surrey with old Wash in the front seat and Beatrix in the rear was hardly noticed as it went past the windows and down the lane. Beatrix had done her duty as a Hammond and would not stay for questioning. Later, Blanche's challis dress, which she had given her mother, was found on Beatrix's bed.

Redfield stood by the door until Hammond was halfway up the stairs, after which he turned and walked toward the elder Maxwell. "Nigger!" he said in a tragic whisper. "The chil' a nigger!"

"Whut you mean? Nigger?" Maxwell failed to comprehend.

"It a nigger, I tell you. The Mandingo, jest like him. A nigger!"

"No! No! It cain't be!"

"It is!"

"A white lady have a nigger? Blanche, she white, she Ham's wife! It his chil'. Ifn any buck rape her, she'd say, she'd tell. No, no! You wrong!" Maxwell set aside his toddy glass which had suddenly turned bitter. "Not the Mandingo?"

"You reckon I don' know a nigger?" Redfield asked rhetorically, expecting no answer. "I tried to keep Ham from goin' up; that the why. Ain't no use in him seein' an' knowin'."

"An' you killed it? That whut the Widder wantin', that whut she call you fer, to kill the nigger?" Maxwell had no doubt. "You done right, right."

"Miz Woodford, afore I got there, she done bashed its head. I would of, would of cut the cord an' let it bleed. I tol' the Widder so, but I never needed. Miz Woodford." Redfield explained.

Hammond returned, his face bloodless, his limp hardly noticeable, his step

resolute. He sank into a chair and stared, wide-eyed, at nothing. "Doc Redfield," he said, "that powder? That pizen powder? The kin' you used on an old, blin' one of Widder Johnson's, 'fore you married? You said if ever I needin' it. You got some left?"

"I reckon so; they's some in my saddlebag," the doctor nodded. "On'y it too good fer him. You had ought to burn him. Cut him first with a dull butcher knife and then burn him. It's the on'y way to learn him."

"Mede, you meanin'? My Mandingo?" Hammond inquired, dazed.

"It was him all right. Sure was. It look jest like him," testified Redfield.

"The powder not fer him. I got another I got to do fer. I goin' to take care the Mandingo my own se'f. I take care of him. Don' you fret," Hammond promised.

Mrs. Redfield came heavily down the stairs and across the hall. "I reckon she be all right now," she said, framed in the sitting room door. "That big wench, she kin do fer her good as me. She know how."

The lack of concern with which Hammond answered "I reckon" gave Redfield to know for whom the poison was intended. But who could blame the young husband?

"You kin go along home, Widder," Redfield told his wife. "I'll come, soon as I kin git somethin' out of the saddlebag fer Hammond, here. I'll ketch you up afore you git there."

The woman adjusted the bonnet on her head and her husband followed to help her into her buggy, after which he turned to his own horse, opened the saddlebag and delved among the powders and pills and bottles he carried there. At length he found the poison for which he searched, wrapped in a soiled paper, unlabeled. He divided the contents and placed a quantity in a scrap of paper torn from the larger piece. After restoring the miscellaneous contents of the saddlebag, he reentered the house with the small packet.

The Maxwells had not moved. They had hardly spoken in his absence.

"Here it be," the doctor said. "It ain't got no taste to it. Jest you stir it up in coffee or a toddy, an' have her drink it down. She won' feel nothin' but jest go to sleep an' stiffen out. It sovereign, sure sovereign."

"Jest put it there on the mantel, please suh," Hammond managed to say. There was no resonance in his voice.

Redfield did as he was bidden and took his departure without any farewell. Sensing the young man's agony, he knew that no amenities were indicated.

When the doctor was gone, Hammond struggled to his feet and went into the kitchen. He soon returned with a toddy into which he poured the contents of the small paper on the mantel.

"Goin' to give it?" asked his father.

"I got to. There ain't no other way," said the son, stalking down the hall.

Maxwell heard him as he went up the stairs. Memnon brought him a toddy

which he tasted but did not drink. His knees ached and he rubbed the joints but failed to relieve the pain.

Hammond went into the room where Blanche lay on the bed. The girl was awake, and Tense, who sat on the foot of the bed, arose. Hammond carried the goblet of toddy and sat in the chair beside the bed where Beatrix had sat.

"Rouse you up an' swaller this. It a-makin' you feel better," he said with no evidence of rancor. "Help her to set up, Tense."

The odor of the potion was alluring to the girl and she reached for it. Hammond sat and watched while she sipped it slowly as Tense supported her.

"I didn' mean no harm, Hammond," Blanche declared weakly. "I didn't mean no harm. Only you an' that Ellen—You didn' pay me no mind, no min' at all, an' I reckoned—I never knowed the baby goin' to come a nigger."

Hammond was silent.

"That good. It taste real good," Blanche said between swallows of the toddy. "It right stren'thenin'. On'y somethin' in it, somethin' in the bottom, white-like."

"That medicine Doc Redfield left fer you. It make you sleep quiet," said her husband.

Blanche drained the goblet and Hammond took it from her hand. Tense eased her mistress back upon her pillows. Hammond sat quietly a few minutes, after which he got up from his chair and, taking the empty glass with him, went downstairs and into the kitchen where he rinsed the glass and set it aside to be washed.

He made his way, dazed but resolute, across the area to Lucy's cabin, which he entered without knocking. "Mede here?" he demanded.

The Mandingo rose from the bed where he lay.

"You know that big hog kettle," the master told the slave. "Well, you fill it up with water, an' strike a fire under it, an' heat it up hot. Bring fire from the kitchen to light it with. We goin' to brine you agin, brine you good."

Being steeped in hot brine was not a pleasant experience, Mede knew, but there was no way to evade the master's purpose. He would go through with the ordeal. He knew better than to protest. Hammond appeared grim and determined, but betrayed no anger. The slave wondered, however, at his failure to examine him and to criticize his condition, as was his wont.

Mede left the cabin and went to the end of the gallery where the vat-like kettle sat, saw that it was raised from the ground with blocks of wood. Then he began carrying more wood from the stacked pile and arranged the pieces around and under the kettle so as to heat the contents quickly. Next, he went to the kitchen for a brand with which to ignite the wood. He saw to it that the dry wood was burning well all around the kettle before he went to the well for water to fill it. He attached the bucket to the well-sweep and placed his weight against the pole, bringing the water to the surface. He poured the water into two buckets which he carried to the kettle. When the first of the water touched

the bottom of the kettle, it hissed into steam which soon subsided with the addition of more water. Again and again he went to the well until the kettle was well filled. He shivered at the thought of getting into the hot brine and remaining there until it should toughen his skin. Why should his master undertake this process just at nightfall? There was no accounting for a white man's whims. Mede knew nothing of what had occurred inside the house that day, and, if he had known, would not have associated it with his salting.

After Mede had left the cabin, Hammond turned to Lucy and told her, "You goin' to tote the wood to keep that fire, after Mede git in that water." As he went toward the house, he hesitated to see that Mede was preparing his bath.

Accompanying his father to the dining room, Hammond could eat no supper, and the older man, sensing the anguish of his son, did not urge him to talk nor offer him counsel. He knew that the boy had poisoned his wife, but envisioned no fitter course he might have taken. He was indeed grateful for the young man's restraint, the absence of boisterous violence, cursing and blows. He knew, of course, of the need to destroy the Mandingo, but left the time and manner to his son. Hammond did not divulge his plans. Maxwell would have liked to have a few more women pregnant to the Negro stallion before his demise, but had misgivings about saying so, because of his doubts that Ham would countenance more of such blood. Indeed, he feared that the youth might undertake to exterminate it by killing all the babies Mede had already begotten.

Supper over, Hammond went upstairs to make sure the poison had done its work. Blanche was not dead. She lay on the bed, breathing shallowly with a detectable heart-beat. Her husband was impatient for the end, but saw that the woman could not long survive. He picked up the body of her son from where it lay on the floor and placed it on the bed beside its mother.

Outside, the night was black, with only the stars for light, only the stars and the embers that sparkled beneath the hog kettle. Mede was gone. Hammond felt of the water which was hot but not boiling, then he limped toward the stable where he got a rusty pitchfork. He might need it. As he came toward the house, he saw Mede replenishing the fire. The water had begun to bubble. He entered the house and went to the sitting room where his father was drinking a toddy.

"Throw the blue coverlid aroun' your shoulders. The nighttime is coollike. Don' want you should catch anythin'. But come," said the boy. "I cravin' you should see."

"Whutever you goin' to do, Son, it all right," declared the father. "I ain't a-needin' I should watch."

"Come," urged the son, adjusting the shawl to his sire's shoulders.

The old man rose stiffly, and Hammond took his arm to guide his steps. He went no further than the gallery, from which he watched.

The water in the kettle was turbulent with heat. The fire around it was brilliant in the dark, crackling and emitting sparks as the wood burned and fell apart.

"Shuck down now," Ham ordered the slave, who kicked himself out of his garments and stood naked.

The coppery skin reflected the fire's glow as the Negro stood with a dignity akin to majesty before his owner. Ham ran his hand over the youth's flank, evaluating the property which his pride and duty prompted him to destroy. He took a firm hold on the pitchfork to quell any show of mutiny.

"Git you in," he ordered.

"It hot. It bilin'," objected Mede.

"I didn't ast you was it hot. I sayin' git in," said Hammond.

The Negro stepped toward the kettle and tested the heat of the water with his hand. "I cain't," he argued. "Please, suh, Masta, suh, that water burn me. I cain't."

"Never min' burnin'. I say," Hammond commanded. The Mandingo knew that when he was told never to mind, instruction was not to be gainsaid.

He swung one leg into the cauldron but the water was unbearably hot and he withdrew it.

"God damn, git in there," said the master, pressing the tines of the pitchfork against the black rump.

The Negro replaced the leg in the pot, grasped the iron edge to support himself while he hoisted the other leg, and burned the palm of his hand. He stood in the bubbling water deep as his knees, treading the bottom of the hot kettle, lifting one foot and then the other to keep from burning them.

"Stop that bouncin' an' set you down," commanded his master. "Set right down, I sayin'."

"I, I cain't," said the Negro, beginning to weep, whether with pain or with his inability to obey.

Hammond stepped forward, raised the pitchfork and drove it into the Negro's abdomen. "I sayin' set down. When I tells you whut to do—," he said and broke his sentence as the Negro fell backward.

"Oh, Masta, Masta. You killin' me, you killin' me. I cain't stan' it," cried the Negro in terror.

"Whut you reckon?" Hammond answered him. "I wishin' I could kill you agin ever' day here on out. Now sqush your head under that water and keep it there," he said, plunging the pitchfork into the upturned face, distorted by pain and terror, pressing it under the water and holding it there. The water muffled the boy's screams of rage and anguish, so long as they lasted, but at length he ceased to struggle. The black integument turned gray and rose from the flesh. Hammond stood a long while over the cauldron, the fire-shine in

his face, until he was sure the black beast was dead, scalded or drowned, he cared not which so long as he was dead.

The moon appeared on the horizon and illumined the black night.

Hammond called to Lucy and told her to replenish the fire and to keep it going throughout the night. "We goin' to cook him till the meat fall away, goin' to make soup so there ain't nothin' lef' but only the bones," he told her.

"Masta, Masta!" the woman wept, wringing her hands. "You done kill Mede, done kill him. He ain't done nothin'. Whut fer you kill him, Masta, suh? Whut fer you kill him?"

She expected no answer, but Hammond said, "Serve him right. Now keep that fire a-goin'."

Maxwell, when it was apparent that the Mandingo was finished, turned toward the door, but before he reached it his son joined him and grasped his arm.

"You got to look about now, I reckon; buy you another fightin' buck," said the father. "Ain't apt to find you anothern like that Mandingo. Mighty purty boy," he sighed as he entered the house.

"Not reckon I git me any othern. Ain't no point in fightin' 'em," the boy replied. "A good one, an' you cain't fin' nobody wantin' to fight him, an' a bad one al'ays gittin' whupped. Cain't trus' no fighter, noways."

Hammond lay alone that night. When Ellen came to remove his boots for him, he sent her away. He lay alone but did not sleep. He lay and looked through the window into the moonlight. He heard Lucy throwing fresh wood upon the fire, and occasionally he saw the sparks that flew upward from the embers and went out. He felt his face redden with shame, shame not for what he himself had done, which was only his duty, but shame for his wife, a white woman and a Hammond, who had brought forth a Negro child. That he should ever have married her! The interminable night! Would morning never come?

At the first hint of dawn he rose, got into his clothes, struggled to put on his boots without aid, and made his way to the room in which Blanche lay rigid in death. He stepped over the body of Tense, sleeping on the floor of the hall outside her mistress' door, but did not rouse her. The room had been his mother's, and Hammond felt that it had been desecrated by the birth in it of the Negro child and, perhaps, by the assignation here at which it was begotten. He stepped to the bedside and laid his hand upon Blanche's brow. It was cold. She was indeed dead. He made an effort to adjust the position of an upturned arm but found it rigid. She must have died early last night. The face was peaceful and there was no indication that she had struggled with death.

Her naked baby lay on the top of the covers beside its mother, one side of its head dented by the blow which had killed it. Naked as it lay, it appeared to Hammond that it must feel the cold of the dawn, and he lifted the small body and placed it under the covers at its mother's breast. He lifted a

pieced quilt to wrap the two bodies for burial, but thought better of the chore and resolved to leave it to Lucretia Borgia. He went out, closed the door, stepped again over the sleeping Tense, and went down the stairs.

Lucy still tended the fire under the cauldron in which the body of the Mandingo simmered. Hammond told her to bring water to replenish what had evaporated, to fill the kettle full, and then to go to bed. He would find a boy to replace her at the task of stoking the fire.

It was early, but the Negroes were beginning to stir. He encountered two stout youths, Brutus, shortened to Brute, and Treasure, whom he commanded to bring shovels and to follow him. He walked ahead while the boys went to get their shovels, but they soon came up with their master. On he walked through the now brightening day, the two slaves at his heels, across the rows of burgeoning cotton toward the worm-fenced, weed-grown enclosure set aside to serve as a family burial ground. Instead of going to the entrance gate, he climbed the fence and his slaves threw their shovels across and followed him. He paused before the wooden slabs that bore the half effaced names of the members of his family buried beneath them, and stooped to pull the tallest of the weeds and grass from his mother's grave. The family was huddled side by side in death in the very middle of the broad expanse, broad enough to accommodate ten numerous generations. Traversing the burial ground was another fence, beyond which there was a host of unmarked mounds beneath each of which rested the body of a dead Negro. Hammond remembered some of these servants and knew just where they lay. It was a quiet, peaceful stretch of high ground with a group of large elms, the young leaves of which were just turning from yellow-green to the deeper green of summer. Seldom disturbed by humans and never shot over, the area was a refuge for bob-whites and jays and cardinals which sensed their safety within its confines. Garter snakes bred here unmolested, and other small things scurried through the weeds at human approach.

Hammond surveyed the scene while the slaves waited to be told what to do. Brute leaned on his shovel, while Treasure threw himself on a grass clearing among the weeds. The customary course was to bury members of the family, as they died, in a line, the last to die alongside the last-made previous grave, but Hammond, choosing a resting place for his wife, felt the profanation of placing her beside his mother. That spot, he reasoned, should be reserved for his father. He went to the division fence and looked across into the Negro burial grounds, moved to inter his wife there. After all, had she not had a Negro child, and was it not to be buried with her? But he could not bring himself to do such a thing to a white woman, however culpable she might be.

At length he chose a spot on the white side of the fence, but hard against it, well away from the white dead, with them but not among them. He paced the space with his feet, length and breadth, and ordered the Negroes to dig the grave, cautioning them to conserve the soil and to pile it against the fence.

He waited while they removed the surface with its weeds from the plat, seeing to it that the corners were square.

"Now, dig it on down, straight and clean an' deep," he told the boys. "We wantin' to bury 'em nice."

Seeing the grave well begun, Hammond left the Negroes at their task and walked toward the house. He paused by the side of the barn and chose one of a suitable size from the assortment of crudely carpentered coffins stacked there weathering while they awaited tenants. The Maxwells buried their dead slaves in coffins instead of merely wrapping them in blankets and tumbling them into graves, and there was always an assortment of coffins of various lengths made in anticipation of the deaths which were happily infrequent occurrences among the plantation population. Having made his selection of the soundest and most neatly fashioned of these boxes, Hammond looked about him for two strong boys to carry it for him to the house. This they did by grasping the handles of rope passed through holes in the sides of the coffin and knotted inside it.

"It not goin' to hold that soup you makin' out of that Mede, Masta suh," the lighter colored of the boys objected, supposing the coffin was for the Mandingo.

"Nev' min' who it fer. Fetch it along," replied the master. He had the bearers set the coffin down on the end of the gallery and then dismissed them.

Entering the house, Hammond found his father at breakfast and joined him, eating heartily, having foregone supper the previous night.

"Reckon it needful, you a-carryin' on," sighed the elder man regretfully.

"Ain't no other way. I wouldn't feel right inside without I do it," Hammond said. "I not a-likin' to do it, no more than you, on'y you knowin', your own se'f, that no gen'leman kin have a woman whut carry on like that—you know—with no nigger buck. Ain't no other way."

"Kind of break up our Mandingos, seem like. Coursen, we got them two suckers, Lucy's wench an' that Ol' Masta Wilson buck outn Big Pearl. Glad we saved somethin' from Mede, but they take a long time to grow." Maxwell appeared to deplore the Mandingo more than Blanche.

"Him! Whut I done is too good fer him. I not a-cravin' more Mandingos. They treach'ous!"

"Not treach'ous an' they watched, no more treach'ous than any nigger buck. Cain't turn your back on any of 'em, any buck, aroun' white ladies. They all lusty-like," opined the elder. "Made that way. I ain't a-blamin' 'em. It the baboon in 'em—half baboon. Ain't no call to behave, savin' you make 'em."

"By rights, I had ought to kill off the suckers outn that Mede, wipe the blood right out," said Hammond, setting his jaw.

"No! No!" the old man protested. "Them suckers ain't done nothin'. Cain't go bustin' up the whole plantation 'cause of one."

Hammond pushed back his chair and rose, not wholly convinced. He summoned Lucretia Borgia and Tense to help him, and together they wrapped the bodies of Blanche and her baby in a quilt, carried them through the hall, down the stairs, and across the gallery, where they laid them in the open coffin. Only Tense wept, not because she had loved her mistress or had been well used by her, but out of self-pity and doubt about her future. Hammond was grim and determined to carry out the duty he had set for himself. He had loved the girl, he thought, whom he had killed for her own honor and for his, and, despite her shortcomings as his wife, had protected her and treated her well, but he had no tears to shed for such a woman. He knelt by the coffin and nailed the lid securely in place.

The cauldron bubbled and the odor of boiling flesh rose from it and filled the air. With his pitchfork, Hammond stirred the brew and saw that the meat was falling from the bones. Then he limped back up the knoll to the burial grounds to assess the progress Treasure and Brute were making in the digging of the grave. He had not expected them to work rapidly and was pleased that they had done so much. The sides of the hole were not quite plumb, and he cautioned the boys to straighten them. Then he stood by and watched them throwing the dirt from the pit, the task progressing more rapidly under the master's surveillance. At length, he tired of watching the slaves and wandered over to the cotton field and finally back to the house. Except for the boys who dug the grave and another boy assigned to keeping the fire going around the kettle, work on the plantation was suspended, and the slaves, all of whom knew about Mede's martyrdom but not the reason for it, kept to their cabins, not knowing which of them should be the next victim. Terrified as they were, none questioned their owner's authority to do what he had done to Mede or to dispose of any of them as he should wish. Hammond climbed the stairs and threw himself upon the bed, but, despite his sleepless night, he was unable to sleep now. He was obsessed. All of his imaginings turned upon visions of his white wife in the bestial arms of the Mandingo. His vengeance had been prompt, but it did not suffice. No vengeance would suffice. He pondered what he might do to make it more terrible and more just.

Hours he lay there, wide-eyed and pondering. Then he arose. The grave must now be finished. He walked mechanically, as in a trance, down the stairs, across the areaway, to the meeting-house barracks. He called upon two stout boys, the first he encountered, and took them with him to the gallery, where he told them to wait for him. He went into the house and along the hall to the sitting room, where his father's chair was drawn up beside the window. The old man had drunk more than his usual number of toddies in an effort to quell his perturbation over the anguish he knew his son to be suffering and which he knew not how to allay.

"We're goin' now," the young man announced. "Crave to come along?"

"Whure to you goin'?" asked the father.

"To bury her, her an' her chil'," Hammond said, with an air of false casualness. "Reckon you kin come? You relished her right well; that is, beforehan' you did."

"You knowin' I cain't walk so fur."

"Well, we'll rig up that hammock I brung you from Natchez. I knowed it would come handy someday," Hammond proposed.

"I'll not ride in that contraption," the old man refused. "It would seem like you totin' me out to dump me in the grave, my own se'f."

He got to his feet, however, and followed his son to the gallery where he stood and watched as the two slaves, one on either side of the coffin, lifted it by its hempen handles and started with it toward the burial ground, followed by his son. He remembered that it had been he who had suggested Blanche Woodford as a consort for Hammond and he blamed himself for what had occurred. If he had been more vigilant during his son's absence, the assignation would have been impossible. He assumed that the Mandingo had waylaid the girl and raped her, but deemed her at least as culpable for her failure to tell of the assault as was Mede for committing it. All knew the lust of black men for white women, which it was the white man's duty to thwart more than to censure, since the Ethiop could no more curb his passion than change his skin. Maxwell stood and watched. He saw the slaves set the coffin on the ground and change sides, each transferring the weight to the opposite arm. Then he saw them lift their burden again and disappear around the corner of the meeting-house barracks, where he lost sight of them.

Arrived at the worm-fence, Hammond called to Brutus and Treasure to take down a panel of it that the coffin might pass. They had finished their digging, but the bottom of the grave was not level, and Hammond ordered the two slaves to set the coffin on the ground while the two others should scrape the grave and level it. When it was ready, he had Treasure remain in the hole to receive the coffin, which the other slaves were to ease down to him. In the process, the box turned on its side and fell upon Treasure's foot, at which he cried out and complained so much that his master ordered him to the surface and delegated Brute to descend into the grave and right the coffin. When it was placed to the master's satisfaction, Brutus climbed out of the hole and Hammond, grasping the loose, dank earth, pelted the coffin with clods. He then delegated Brutus to shovel back into the grave the dirt that lay beside it, while he, himself, knelt on the ground to manipulate Treasure's foot to make sure it was not broken.

He did not wait until the grave was filled, but, instructing Brutus how he wished it to be banked, dismissed the slaves and walked slowly back toward the house. Passing the still boiling cauldron, he was impelled to pick up the pitchfork, which leaned against a tree, and stir its contents. The tines stuck in Mede's half-denuded skull, which Hammond brought to the

surface and replaced for further boiling in the pot. He gave orders that the liquid which had boiled away should be replaced with water and that the fire should not be let to die.

Supper over, Hammond sat with his father, who drank his toddy. Hammond drank nothing. When Memnon came to refill the old man's goblet, Hammond said to the slave, "That Lucretia Borgia, tell her she should come here."

Memnon marked the stern and peremptory tone, and soon Lucretia Borgia, smoothing her apron, stood before the master in the twilight.

"Lucretia Borgia!" Hammond began.

"Yas, Masta, suh," she said.

"Lucretia Borgia, you knowin'—you knowin' 'bout this?" the master charged rather than asked.

"Knowin'? Knowin' whut, suh?" the woman countered for time, aware of what he meant.

"'Bout Miz Blanche an' that Mandingo. You knowin'," he said.

Lucretia Borgia hesitated in her flustration, not sure whether it was more discrete to admit or to deny the accusation, doubtful that denial would be believed. At length, with a hint of a giggle in her voice, she acknowledged in part that she knew. "I knowin' Mede come in the house an' up the stairs. Tense say Mist'ess sen' fer him," she said. "I not knowin' whut he do."

"Lucretia Borgia not here that time. She in New Orleans that time," the father sought to defend the woman.

"That time? While I gone up in Tennessee? That afore she sold," replied the son.

"Yas, suh, Masta; that the time, while you gone," admitted the cook.

"Whyn't you say! Whyn't you tell me? Whyn't you call Papa, here? You knowin' Mede got no hold in the house, no business here," the young man upbraided her.

"Tense say—," Lucretia Borgia retorted.

"Nev' min' whut Tense say," said Hammond.

"Tense say Miz Blanche, she sen', suh," went on the woman. "Say Miz Blanche say tell that Mede to come here. Tense, she cry. All time cry."

"Nev' min' Tense, I tellin' you. Whyn't you tell Papa, your own se'f?" the boy interrogated. "Whyn't you look after things, like you supposed?"

"It white doin's," Lucretia Borgia shrugged. "I not never mess in white folk's doin's. You tol' me, you own se'f, Masta, suh, white doin's is white doin's, an' me, I ain't no call to mess."

"I reckon I did. But lettin' a nigger buck to a white lady. You know it ain't safe, ain't never safe."

"If'n white lady wantin' that ol' hog boar of yourn, I ain't a-goin' to put in," Lucretia Borgia shrugged again. "White lady know whut she crave."

"She, Miz Blanche, never crave that black ape. You know she never. She

sen' to give him them red ear-drops, that all, an' he rape her," Hammond rationalized.

"Whut fer she sen' the second time and the third time then?" rebutted the woman.

"More than once? It ain't true," declared Hammond.

"Four days in all, while you away, suh," Lucretia Borgia held up her fingers. She had tolerated rather than liked Blanche and was pleased that she was able to indict her. "That Mede, he right temptatious to a woman. You-all done seen him nekid."

"To a nigger wench. Not to no white lady."

"I not a-knowin' 'bout no white lady, suh," sighed the Negro.

"I got me a right good notion to gather you up an' carry you back to that white gen'leman in New Orleans whut bought you," Hammond threatened.

"Yas, suh, Masta, suh, I a-hearin'," the woman answered.

"As you goin' out, sen' me in Tense. Hear?" he dismissed her, baffled by her taciturnity. He limped the floor impatiently until Hortense arrived.

When at length she came, he hardly knew what he wanted to ask of her. "Tense," he stated rather than questioned, "you Miz Blanche's nigger, takin' care an' doin' fer her?"

"Yas, suh, Masta," Tense whispered her reply and shivered in her fear of him.

"You a-knowin' that Mandingo rape your mist'ess?"

"Mede, suh. Yas, suh, I a-knowin' it."

"Whyn't you say? Whyn't you tell me?" he demanded. "You a-knowin' I kill him."

"Yas, suh, Masta, only Miz say I mus'n't tell. She say she mad at you, say she goin' to pay you back. I a-tellin' her—much as I could—she hadn't ought to; you be mad," the girl absolved herself. "She say fetch him."

"An' you do it? You fetch him? Then whut?"

"I 'on't know, suh, Masta, suh. I 'on't know. I 'on't know nothin'," Tense broke into frightened tears.

"Whut you do while—while he in there, while he in there with your mist'ess?" the master insisted.

"I set outside on the stair steps—jest set."

"Didn' say nothin'? Didn' tell your ol' masta?"

"Naw, suh. I jest set an' cried. I tol' Miz Lucretia Borgia—afterwards."

"She knowin' all the time whut a-goin' on?" Hammond sought to incriminate somebody.

"She know. Ever'body know. All the niggers know," she admitted. Tense raised her skirt to dry her eyes.

"The house niggers or all of 'em?"

"Leasewise the house niggers, 'ceptin' Ellen. She away with you that time. Nobody ever tell Miz Ellen. They afeared to."

"How many times? How many times you fetch that ape in fer Miz Blanche?"

"You meanin' Mede?" Tense asked. She counted on her fingers and held up her hand with the thumb concealed in the palm. "That many," she said, unable to count to four. "That many, I reckon."

"All you niggers knowin' an' none of 'em ever sayin'—none of 'em tellin' me?" Hammond shook his head in disbelief.

"Them twins, that you done sol' one of 'em, I 'on't know which one, I couldn't tell 'em one from the other, one of 'em was a-goin' to tell, said he would, 'lessen Miz Blanche—, 'lessen Miz Blanche—," Tense could not bring herself to go on.

"Unlessen Miz Blanche do whut?" the master prompted.

" 'Lessen she pleasure him too, like she done with Mede," she said.

Hammond, pacing the floor, turned on the standing girl, raised his arm and brought his palm across her cheek with a resounding slap that staggered her. "That a lie, a damn lie! You dirty, lyin' skunk of a nigger!" he exclaimed.

The elder Maxwell, who had so far been silent, murmured, "Nigger talk. You know that ain't true, Son. Them twins wasn't big enough."

The son doubted the validity of the objection. "They big as I was the first time, the time you give me that li'l yaller wench." Despite that he had slapped Tense and given her the lie, he believed her story, knew that she told the truth. "That Meg, leastwise, was heavy-hung and horny, horny as any ram."

"Too late, too late now. You cain't do nothin', Ham, even an' if she tellin' true," said the elder man, draining his goblet.

Hammond shrugged. "How many times? How many times that Meg rape your mist'ess? How many times?"

Tense stood sullen and did not answer.

"How many times, I askin' you, nigger?" Hammond demanded.

"I 'on't know, suh, please, suh, Masta, suh," at length she replied. Then she added, " 'Mos' ever'day, I reckon, afore you went an' sol' them twins. Mos' ever'day, when he could sneak out an' upstairs, an' sometimes at night when you asleep with Miz Ellen."

"Then it was Meg, 'cause Alph always sleepin' with you, Papa," Hammond reasoned.

"Sometimes both of 'em, in the daytime, one after the othern," Tense said. "But jest one said he'd tell."

Hammond was revolted, desolated, impotent to revenge himself upon the twins. "That enough," he said, dismissing Tense, but he called her back.

"You still a virgin, I reckon, ain't you?" he asked her.

Knowing that an affirmative answer was desired, she gave it. "Yas, suh," she said doubtfully, then added, "I don't know whut that is, virgin. I reckon I is."

"You ain't never pleasured with no buck, I know you ain't."

"Naw, suh, Masta, suh, 'ceptin' that other twin I ain't. Mist'ess say while she pleasure one of 'em, I got to pleasure the othern. An' I done it. I reckon I done it," Tense confessed.

"That case," said the master, "you know whut I goin' to do with you? I goin' to pick me out the bigges', blackes', uglies' buck we got on this plantation an' I goin' to give him you. Un'erstan'? Give him you. Reckoned we'd raise house niggers out'n you, but ain't; goin' to raise fiel' niggers, big, black, greasy, dirty fiel' niggers. House niggers got to come from wenches we can trus'. Cain't trus' you, but you right soun' an' good enough fer field niggers. Now go!"

Hammond in his anger was sincere in his determination to fulfill his threat. He did not reckon how much more valuable a house servant might be than a common field hand, although he would do so after his wrath had subsided. He was in a mood for vengeance. Tense's offense was in her failure to tell him of his wife's misconduct, which he would not have believed in any event. Tense had been Blanche's, and her loyalty was to her mistress, not to her master, and besides, a slave's testimony against a white was as null as it was reprehensible. Tense knew these facts as well as Hammond. He was unable to bring himself to flog the girl for her adherence to the black and white mores, but he could punish her by forcing her to live in a cabin with some brutal black boy and to bear for him gross children destined for arduous toil in the cotton or the cane.

Tense's answer to his threat was only an acquiescent "Yas, suh, Masta." No tears. He had expected tears, contrition, a plea for mercy.

Tense was, in fact, not appalled at her promised fate. She liked big men, and complexion did not count. For her there was no ugly male, only men of greater or less comeliness. Besides, marriage, if so it could be called, since the girl had no concept of permanence in such a relationship, would take her out of the house, away from the necessity to minister to so many petty whims, to conform to so many formalities, to watch so many "p's" and "q's." She dreaded most the loss of white men's food to which she was now used, but cabin rations held no terror for her. She knew that this was punishment, but knew not wherein it lay. She was satisfied when she left the room, as she had been ordered to do. The question that assailed her was which of the slaves she was to be mated to.

The cauldron still bubbled slowly over the fire which had not been permitted to burn itself out. The following morning, Hammond stirred the slab, thick liquid with his pitchfork, lifted out of it some large bones, which were free of meat. They were all that remained of the Mandingo. He called Lucy.

"Git buckets," he told her. "An' fill 'em up. We is goin' to tote this boy to the buryin'. Fill 'em up an' follow me."

Lucy, without spoken protest, disappeared into Lucretia Borgia's kitchen and returned with three wooden buckets, bound with copper hoops, and a gourd dipper. She set them in a row beside the cauldron and dipped into them the broth made from the flesh of the Mandingo, her son and mate. Her master watched her impatiently. When the buckets were full, Lucy stooped and lifted the middle bucket to her head and balanced it there while she bent her knees to grasp the bales of the other two buckets with her hands.

"This here one leak," was the woman's only comment.

"Nev' min'," said the master. "Spillin' some of him along the path ain't goin' to count none. We got a plenty of him."

He led the way and the black woman followed him with stately tread, the two buckets balanced one against the other at the ends of her powerful arms, the bucket on her head as steady as if it had been a part of her anatomy. The man limped slowly, regardful of the woman's burden, across the area, to the barn, around the corner of the meeting house used as a dormitory, across the rows of cotton, now almost knee-high, on to the gap in the fence of the burial ground. There he quickened his pace, and beside the new grave, the freshly banked earth of which dried in the sunshine, he paused and waited for the woman.

"Give here," he said, taking the leaking bucket from her hand. He poured the contents slowly over the broken earth of the grave, waiting for the warm liquid to trickle into the soil. Then he took the second bucket from her hand and emptied it on the grave. Lucy stood erect and silent, the third bucket on her head. He reached toward it and she lifted it down and gave it to him.

When it was empty, he nested the three buckets one in another and gave them to Lucy. "Bring more," he commanded her. When she was gone, he walked to the fence and leaned on it to await her return.

Five trips Lucy made with her three buckets between the cauldron and the burial ground before she announced, one bucket only half full, "That's all, Masta, suh, savin' the bones, suh."

When Hammond emptied the final bucketful over the new well-soaked grave, he noticed a piece of flesh not yet disintegrated. Two turkey buzzards wheeled in the sky and he knew that the flesh would not long remain.

"Well, that's him," he said, standing erect. "Her a-wantin' him so bad, I reckon she got him now. He'll kind of sink and trickle down to her. You kin go now, Lucy. That all I a-cravin' you to do."

The woman picked up the three buckets and placed them, one within the other, on her head. She moved to go, reached the gap in the fence, and turned.

"Please, suh, Masta, kin I have Mede's bones?" she asked plaintively. "They all I got of him. Mede, he never mean nothin' bad, Masta. He never mean no harm."

The man made her no answer. She went toward the house and he followed her some fifty paces behind, stopping now and again to survey the cotton in

the pretense even to himself that he was unmoved by the tragedy that had befallen him. When Lucy reached the point in the pathway where she should turn off toward her cabin, the master called to her.

"Take them bones you a-wantin'," he said. "On'y clean that kettle, clean. Scour it out with sand. We goin' to be needin' it, come hog-killin' time."

The elder Maxwell allayed his anxieties about his son's distress by drinking more and more toddies until he was sodden with them. They served him as an anodyne for the sorrow he knew Hammond was enduring silently, without discussion. Hammond returned from the fields, such conversation as occurred turned upon the older man's affliction, whether the rheumatism was better or worse, how much the ache, the swelling of the joints. The older man knew that only time could cure the anger, the injured pride, the sense of loss, possibly the feeling of guilt, of his son. Days passed, meals without talk, toddies in the twilight with nothing said. The cotton grew in the mild spring weather, and the hands, under Hammond's supervision, kept the weeds in check. A Negro boy came down with persistent pains in his lower abdomen, but was purged and there was no alarm. Two women bore children the same night, both without serious difficulty. Hammond told his father briefly of the occurrences on the plantation, but there was little discussion of them. The whole house was quiet. The house-slaves spoke among themselves in subdued voices. Maxwell was aware that Hammond seethed with unvoiced emotions.

Blanche had been ten days dead, buried nine days since. Supper was finished and Maxwell sipped his toddy. Hammond's sat on the floor at his side, untasted.

"Well," said the younger man, "I reckon I goin', goin' 'bout tomorrer."

"Goin'? Goin' whure to?" asked the father placidly, with no show of the alarm which he felt.

"Jest a-goin'," replied the son. "First off to New Orleans. I got to kill me them two twins."

"You cain't; cain't do that," objected Maxwell. "They ain't yourn."

"I'll pay fer 'em. Won't be much, two triflin' saplin's. If need, I give it all back, the money we sol' 'em fer. Won't need though." Hammond's blue eyes were focused in the twilight as in a dream. "No jedge goin' to assess me more than they worth, leastwise, when he hear why I done it."

"You ain't got no proof," the older man protested.

"You hear whut Tense say? Tense ain't tellin' no lies. Whut she sayin' 'bout Blanche don' count, but a nigger kin say agin a nigger an' that the truth," Hammond said with finality.

"Mayhap be," the father admitted. "Only—"

"Shoot down that Meg and that Alph is the only way to clear out my head. I know it is. Things jest keep goin' 'roun' an' 'roun' inside of me. Cain't sleep, cain't eat, cain't pleasure, cain't think, cain't do nothin' so long as they a-livin'. Gittin' shet of her an' the Mandingo don' count none, now that Tense

say 'bout them twins," Hammond spoke slowly with apparent deliberation. He paused only to sigh.

"They dead, you goin' to be satisfy, you reckon?" Maxwell asked doubtfully.

"I 'on't know," admitted Hammond. "After that, mayhap I goin' to saunter on west, mayhap clean to the Texies, fin' some good groun' to grow cotton on, whure I kin look a white man in the face without he sayin' to hisse'f, 'There go Hammond Maxwell, whose white wife pleasured with niggers.' "

"Nobody don' know that," argued Maxwell.

"Savin' I knows it, an' you knows it, an' Redfield knows it, and his Widder. An' who know how many more?"

"Well, you growed up now, an' you knows how you feel inside. I cain't hold you from goin'," Maxwell conceded. "Take along the gold, whutever you want of it, an' the niggers, many as you need. Falconhurst is here fer you to come back to."

"I'll come back an' git you, soon as I settle, you an' li'l Sophy. Take care of her."

"Lucretia Borgia an' Big Pearl, they'll min' her good until you ready fer her. Only me, I reckon I ain't goin'. Come back an' git niggers, all you craves of 'em. They yourn. Only let me stay, me an' Memnon an' Lucretia Borgia, an' the Mandingos, what's lef' of 'em."

"Papa! Papa!" Hammond threw himself at his father's feet and embraced his legs. " 'Tain't a-goin' to be right—me in the Texies an' you here."

"Falconhurst always here fer you to come back," the father said. He paused before he went on, "Me? I belong here, seem like. My bones an' the meat on 'em are made of Falconhurst dirt. Born here, growed here, lived here all my life a-knowin ever'body. Reckon it's fittin' I die here an' rot back into the groun' I come from, rest me alongside your mamma on the hill. You gone, Son, I got to throw to one side this rheumatiz, I reckon, an' take aholt."